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Too Good to Compete? The Role of Brand Morality in Judging Competitive Practices

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Abstract

In an era of growing ethical consumerism, many companies adopt moral branding strategies by emphasizing values such as fairness, sustainability, and transparency. While this positioning can strengthen consumer trust, it can also backfire when moral brands adapt routine business practices, such as competitive advertising or cost-cutting, may be perceived as inauthentic with their ethical image. This possibility highlights the contextual nature of transgression: what is judged as a violation depends less on the action itself and more on who performs it and what expectations are attached to them.

This study explores whether morally positioned brands are judged more harshly than traditional brands when engaging in competitive behaviors and whether perceived authenticity mediates this effect. An online experiment with 129 participants was conducted to test these relationships. The study adds to research on moral expectations in business and highlights the complexity of evaluating transgressions in ambiguous contexts.

Keywords: *moral companies, transgression, competitive behavior, perceived authenticity, perceived immorality*

Abstract (German translation)

In einer Zeit zunehmenden ethischen Konsums setzen viele Unternehmen auf moralische Markenstrategien, indem sie Werte wie Fairness, Nachhaltigkeit und Transparenz betonen. Diese Positionierung kann zwar das Vertrauen der Verbraucher stärken, jedoch auch nachteilig wirken, wenn routinemäßige Geschäftspraktiken wie Wettbewerbswerbung oder Kostensenkungen als unauthentisch und unvereinbar mit einem ethischen Image wahrgenommen werden. Diese Möglichkeit verdeutlicht den kontextabhängigen Charakter von Übertretungen: Ob ein Verhalten als Verstoß gilt, hängt weniger von der Handlung selbst ab als vielmehr davon, wer sie ausführt und welche Erwartungen damit verbunden sind.

Diese Studie untersucht, ob moralisch positionierte Unternehmen für Wettbewerbsverhalten strenger beurteilt werden als traditionelle Unternehmen und ob die wahrgenommene Authentizität diesen Effekt vermittelt. Ein Online-Experiment mit 129 Teilnehmenden wurde durchgeführt, um diese Zusammenhänge zu testen. Die Studie leistet einen Beitrag zur Forschung über moralische Erwartungen an Unternehmen und hebt die Komplexität der Bewertung von Übertretungen in mehrdeutigen Kontexten hervor.

Keywords: *moral companies, transgression, competitive behavior, perceived authenticity, perceived immorality*

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1. Introduction

What if every chocolate bar were produced fairly, free from child labor, and under conditions that guaranteed a living wage for farmers? For many consumers, this remains a hypothetical scenario. But in 2024, Tony's Chocolonely transformed this ethical thought experiment into a bold advertising campaign (Gruet, 2024). The brand, known for its social mission, launched an aggressive and provocative initiative that mimicked the packaging of major competitors like Milka, Twix, and Ferrero Rocher to spotlight persistent injustices in the chocolate industry (Gruet, 2024). Aligned with Tony's moral stance, it also raises a deeper question on how consumers evaluate such an offensive and confrontational strategy when it comes from a brand that claims to be "good"? And do they judge these actions as inauthentic and inconsistent with the brand's values?

Brands increasingly position themselves as moral actors, seeking to claim the moral high ground through environmental initiatives, social responsibility programs, and ethical business practices (Campbell & Winterich, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2024). Broader societal shifts serve as powerful drivers, inspiring companies to adopt more socially responsible models and respond to unmet societal needs through innovation and moral leadership (Pless et al., 2021). Moral brands, those that build their brand around values like fairness, sustainability, and transparency, enjoy stronger brand recognition and preference among consumers, as such positioning fosters trust and emotional attachment by signaling alignment with consumers' values (Riharjo et al., 2025). Additionally, their products and services are viewed more favorably due to halo effects, where positive environmental associations spill over into perceptions of quality and performance. Furthermore, their relationships with customers are strengthened as value alignment fosters trust, loyalty, and willingness to pay a premium (Loaiza-Ramírez et al., 2022).

At the same time, a moral positioning can paradoxically become a liability, since consumers increasingly expect moral brands to uphold ethical values consistently (Wagner et al., 2009). Prior research has shown that when such brands engage in clear ethical violations, such as gender discrimination or cases of fraud, they are especially vulnerable to criticism and backlash (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016; Kim et al., 2019). Yet, deliberate but ethically ambiguous behaviors, such as competitive behavior, have received less attention. These actions are intentional and strategic, often confrontational in nature. They occupy an ethically ambiguous space wherein competitive actions may be perceived as transgressive depending on the actor's moral positioning. For morally positioned brands, such tactics may conflict with the perceived moral identity, creating transgression perceptions that apply exclusively to moral organizations.

In order to investigate this, the study draws from *Double Standards Theory* (Foschi, 2000) to explain that identical actions are not judged solely on objective standards; rather, their moral judgments can be shaped by who performs the acts (Foschi, 2000). Extending this logic, consumer judgments of moral brands depend additionally on whether the brand's behavior is perceived as authentic and consistent with its claimed values (Yoon & Schwarz, 2006). Perceived authenticity therefore represents a key mechanism that may explain why competitive behavior is evaluated more harshly when enacted by morally positioned brands.

Given that more brands strive to position themselves on moral grounds, it is essential to consider the implications of such positioning for consumer moral values (Campbell & Winterich, 2018). This study therefore investigates how morally positioned brands are evaluated when engaging in the same competitive business practices as traditional brands. Furthermore, it examines whether such inconsistency may reduce perceptions of authenticity and ultimately lead to perceptions of immorality.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Moral Brands and Moral Positioning

A moral brand is one whose identity is rooted in an intrinsic commitment to ethical principles such as honesty, integrity, accountability, and social responsibility (Fan, 2005; Dees, 2018). Unlike brands that adopt ethics in response to external pressure, moral brands are guided by an inherent moral compass that drives their foundational mission, decision-making, and long-term strategy (Dees, 2018). These brands aim to generate profit while simultaneously addressing societal issues, aligning purpose and performance (Dees & Anderson, 2003). This brand image is an essential factor in consumer purchase decisions. Research has long shown that consumers are willing to pay more for brands associated with an ethical cause, since acting ethically meets their expectations and makes the purchase feel more rewarding (Creyer & Ross, 1997). Also, more recent studies confirm that this willingness persists in contemporary markets (Loaiza-Ramírez et al., 2022). Moreover, consumers perceive brands that do not solely focus on profit as warm and more trustworthy, because they signal benevolence and concern for society. This social identity reduces perceptions of opportunism and increases trust, which in turn leads to more positive attitudes toward such brands (Tsalikis & Seaton, 2006; Antonetti et al., 2021; Ferrell et al., 2019; Aaker et al., 2004). Due to these advantages, more and more brands attempt to incorporate moral components into their branding and business model (Campbell & Winterich, 2018). However, brands perceived as moral can often face harsher criticism when actions appear inconsistent with their ethical positioning (Effron et al., 2018), as brand positioning itself can shape moral expectations (Lee et al., 2017). By signaling moral commitments, brands raise consumer expectations, making deviation feel like a stronger violation than it would for a traditional brand (Creyer & Ross, 1997).

This phenomenon has been explored in psychological research, which shows that moral judgment is influenced not only by the nature of an action but also by who performs it (Foschi, 2000; Berger et al., 1972). *Status Characteristics Theory* (Berger et al., 1972) explains how external markers such as prestige, gender, or race create expectation about competence and behavior, even when those markers are irrelevant to the task at hand. Foschi's (2000) *Double Standard Theory* highlights how such expectations are applied unequally. According to this perspective, individuals judge others using relative standards that are shaped by social context. These standards function as interpretive filters that link expectations to evaluations. What is considered "good" or acceptable behavior often depends on the benchmark being applied. Individuals may unconsciously apply stricter criteria to individuals from certain groups, making them more likely to perceive those individuals as lacking competence, even when their behavior is objectively identical. The theory sheds light on why individuals are judged differently for exhibiting the same behavior, particularly when status characteristics such as gender, morality, race, competence, or social standing are involved. These characteristics can trigger biased evaluations based on the perceived identity or role, leading to unequal treatment. Furthermore, when direct evidence of competence is lacking, people often rely on moral traits as substitutes for judging ability (Webster, 1982, as cited in Foschi, 2000). In such cases, being perceived as moral can spill over where positive moral impressions shape perceptions of competence or trustworthiness in unrelated domains.

While *Double Standard Theory* traditionally addresses how individuals are judged based on social status characteristics, recent research suggests consumers evaluate brands in similarly personified ways (Aggarwal, 2004). As Aggarwal (2004) argues, consumers apply relational norms to brands, attributing moral character, behavioral expectations, and even intentions to brands just as they would to individuals. This is consistent with Fournier's (1998) view that consumers engage with brands in a manner resembling human relationships, allowing brands to embed themselves within consumers' identities. Thus, consumers do not treat brands as faceless institutions; instead, they respond to them as if they possess human-like traits, including personality and moral agency (Aaker, 1997).

Therefore, moral brands could be judged based on different criteria than traditional brands. By positioning themselves as serving a social mission or upholding ethical values, they could invite expectations that extend beyond specific ethical behaviors (Foschi, 2000). Consumers tend to evaluate such brands within a broader moral framework, expecting consistency between the brand's proclaimed values and actions across all domains of business operations.

2.2 The Misalignment of a Salient Moral Identity

Corporate Social Irresponsibility is increasingly recognized as an element of today's corporate landscape (Scheidler & Edinger-Schons, 2020; Xu et al., 2021). Companies must operate in complex, highly competitive contexts that often lead to ethical trade-offs and, at times, irresponsible behavior (Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013). When such behavior violates explicit or implicit ethical norms and expectations, it is considered a transgression (Grappi et al., 2013). Importantly, transgressions are not just conceptual labels; they can carry consequences. Trangressions can provoke a sense of injustice among consumers and result in negative responses such as harming consumer attitudes (Xu et al., 2021) or reducing purchase intentions (Schmalz & Orth, 2012). Furthermore, when unethical behavior is seen as deliberate or within the brand’s control, consumers blame, and emotional reactions intensify since the brand is able to prevent or control the transgression (Klein & Dawar, 2004; Antonetti et al., 2021).

While these effects apply broadly, transgression could differ for moral brands since consumers often adopt communal norms in evaluating them, expecting to demonstrate altruism, care, and integrity (Aggarwal, 2004). As a result, behavior that may appear neutral or acceptable for traditional brands can be perceived as violations of shared social or moral norms that undermine their ethical credibility when performed by a morally positioned organization (Xu et al., 2021). When a moral brand is perceived to violate its stated ethical principles, consumers experience stronger adverse reactions compared to violations by companies that do not make a moral claim (Wagner et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2019). Such perceived deviation from ethical principles can lead to corporate hypocrisy, which describes “the belief that a company claims to be something that it is not” (Wagner et al. 2009, p.79).

One context in which this risk of hypocrisy could emerge is in brands’ competitive behavior. Such behaviors are a common phenomenon in the marketplace (Alvarado-Karste & Kidwell, 2022), especially in times where fast imitation and product innovation are constantly growing (Schallehn et al., 2014). With competitive behavior, brands aim to win over a larger market share and increase their visibility in their sector (Alvarado-Karste & Kidwell, 2022). Brands compete in various ways, such as entering other companies’ markets, price wars, or attempting to win over other companies’ customers (Kilduff, 2019). Alvarado-Karste and Kidwell (2022) illustrated that in a brand rivalry situation, consumers dissociate with brands that mistreat other brands since the feeling of resentment arises, which leads to more favorable attitudes towards the brand that is treated unfairly and more negative attitudes towards the brand that acts unfairly. Injustice in competition can therefore activate consumers’ moral self-identity, making them condemn competitive behavior they see as unfair. This could explain why competitive tactics, while common, can also function as a moral transgression in the eyes of consumers.

Comparative advertisement can be a specific strategy of competition tactics in the marketing domain (Williams & Page, 2013). Within this strategy, product attributes are highlighted through direct brand-to-brand comparisons. Thereby, brands often glorify their own products' features while simultaneously criticizing competitors (Pechmann & Ratneshwar, 1991). Various research studies investigating comparative advertising have long sparked debate regarding their moral implications (James & Hensel, 1991). They note that comparative advertising is perceived as aggressive, unfair, and impersonal by consumers (Dröge, 1989).

These findings illustrate the ambiguity surrounding competitive tactics. Such behaviors do not always clearly cross ethical boundaries, but they may still be perceived as moral violations (Effron & Monin, 2010). Furthermore, these behaviors can be perceived either as standard market practices that secure competitive advantage and benefit consumers in the short term, such as through lower prices or greater distinctiveness, or as practices that bring disadvantages, such as hostility, unfairness, or reduced quality over time (Berendt et al., 2018).

While uncertainty in behavior can sometimes cushion against negative judgments (Effron & Monin, 2010), it does not preclude consumer condemnation entirely. For instance, recent literature on ethical labeling shows that negatively framed moral claims (e.g., “slave-free” or “cruelty-free”) may still provoke critical evaluation, since they implicitly cast competitors as morally deficient (Amasino et al., 2025). In such cases, the brand is already engaging in implicit competitive behavior, signaling that others do not meet the same ethical standards, blurring the line between moral signaling and subtle moral aggression. When this kind of implicit competitive messaging becomes explicit, the perceived aggression could be amplified. Importantly, while brands often attempt to conceal their unethical transgressions to avoid public scrutiny (Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013), competitive tactics such as those in advertising are inherently public and transparent, making them more noticeable to consumers and stakeholders.

Consumers’ perception of whether a behavior is ethical or unethical depends on how they evaluate it against their own moral standards (Sparks & Pan, 2010). However, when clear evidence of wrongdoing is absent, consumers tend to interpret ambiguous incidents based on the brand’s past record of social responsibility (Lasarov & Hoffmann, 2020). A strong positive track record can grant brands the benefit of the doubt, whereas a negative history amplifies suspicion of misconduct (Lasarov & Hoffmann, 2020). Therefore, for morally positioned brands, competitive behaviors present a significant challenge, since ambiguity could work against them, as even unclear actions could be scrutinized more harshly when they appear inconsistent with the brand’s ethical image. The elevated moral standard applied to ethical brands can eliminate interpretive flexibility for actions that are neither clearly ethical nor unethical (Blanken et al., 2015). Especially when the behavior is seen as confrontational, aggressive, or unfair, traits often associated with competition (Dröge, 1989), it can potentially violate consumer expectations of moral actions (Murphy et al., 2017; Chell et al., 2014). In contrast, traditional brands might engage in similar actions without consequence. Therefore, the moral evaluation of competitive acts could depend not solely on the behavior itself, but on the actor's identity and how that behavior aligns with established moral positioning.

2.3 The Mediating Role of Perceived Authenticity

Integrating social motives into business practices does not automatically benefit brands since a social mission alone does not guarantee that brands are perceived as “the good ones” (Yoon & Schwarz, 2006). While consumers may have heightened expectations toward moral brands, these expectations do not necessarily translate into judgments of morality. Instead, such evaluations often depend on whether the brand is perceived as sincere, as acting in alignment with its core values (Yoon & Schwarz, 2006). This dynamic is strongly connected to the concept of brand authenticity, which represents consumers’ subjective evaluation of the genuineness of a brand’s actions and motives (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). Authenticity emerges from the alignment between brand identity and brand image (Schallehn et al., 2014). While brand identity consists of the idea of how a brand sees itself, brand image is ascribed to the brand by external audiences. Since brand identity is not directly observable, consumers rely on specific evaluative dimensions to perceive authenticity (Schallehn et al., 2014).

One dimension being considered is the integrity dimension, which reflects a brand’s moral character and its sense of ethical responsibility, indicating genuine commitment to stated values and consumer welfare (Morhart et al., 2015). Thereby, authenticity in this dimension arises when brands stay true to their moral principles. Meanwhile, the credibility dimension encompasses consumers' perception of a brand's intention and capacity to fulfill its promises (Schallehn et al., 2014). This dimension emphasizes the importance of consistent follow-through on stated commitments and claims (Morhart et al., 2015). Furthermore, the continuity dimension encompasses a timelessness character, historicity, and the capability to be more than a trend. (Morhart et al., 2015; Bruhn et al., 2012). Additionally, authenticity arises when brands' actions appear intrinsically motivated rather than purely profit-driven (Wang et al., 2023). Perceptions of greed or excessive profit-maximization can undermine authenticity and contribute to judgments of immorality (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016; Beverland et al., 2008).

Authenticity is always judged in relation to a brand’s claimed identity or positioning (Schallehn et al., 2014). Thus, even traditional brands can be considered inauthentic when their actions deviate from their promises. However, moral brands could be vulnerable to authenticity threats due to their explicit value commitments. Incorporating social dimensions can enhance the above-stated dimensions of authenticity and strengthen brand image (Yoon & Schwarz, 2006), but only when consumers perceive these motives as genuine. However, when cues of sincerity are ambiguous, such efforts may backfire (Yoon & Schwarz, 2006; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006).

This risk is heightened when new information emerges that contradicts a brand's previously stated positions; it can create dissonance for consumers, prompting them to question the authenticity behind earlier actions (Lange & Washburn, 2012). In addition to factors such as perceived greed (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016), ethical expectations (Ferrell et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2019), and perceived intentionality (Pizzetti et al., 2021), authenticity is expected to play a central role in how consumers can evaluate potential transgressions.

2.4 Ambiguous Transgressions and Their Effect on Perceived Immorality

Consumer evaluations in the marketplace extend beyond price and product quality to include ethical and moral considerations (Shamir, 2008). This phenomenon operates within the broader marketing context of marketplace morality, which Campbell & Winterich (2018) define as "all issues relating to the norms, values, practices, identities, institutions and psychological mechanisms and responses to interactions perceived by a consumer as relevant to questions of right and wrong within a marketplace or market exchange" (p. 169-170).

Within this framework, consumer evaluations of brand behavior extend beyond traditional performance to encompass moral judgements about right and wrong (Campbell & Winterich, 2018). These moral evaluations are inherently flexible and contextual, which arises from intuition rather than logical reasons, creating variability in how identical practices are perceived across different situations and stakeholders (Campbell & Winterich, 2018). Consequently, consumers' perceptions of moral behavior frequently diverge from brand perspectives on the same actions (Brunk, 2012).

Within moral markets, self-interest and social good operate simultaneously, requiring consumers to balance both (Campbell & Winterich, 2018). This dual orientation means that stakeholders expect brands to pursue legitimate business interests while maintaining a commitment to broader social welfare (Campbell & Winterich, 2018). However, this creates inherent tension, as behaviors that serve business interests, such as outsourcing to reduce costs or engaging in competition, may appear to conflict with social welfare commitments.

3. Conceptual Model

The following Conceptual Model illustrates an overview of the main constructs, as well as their hypothesized relationship.

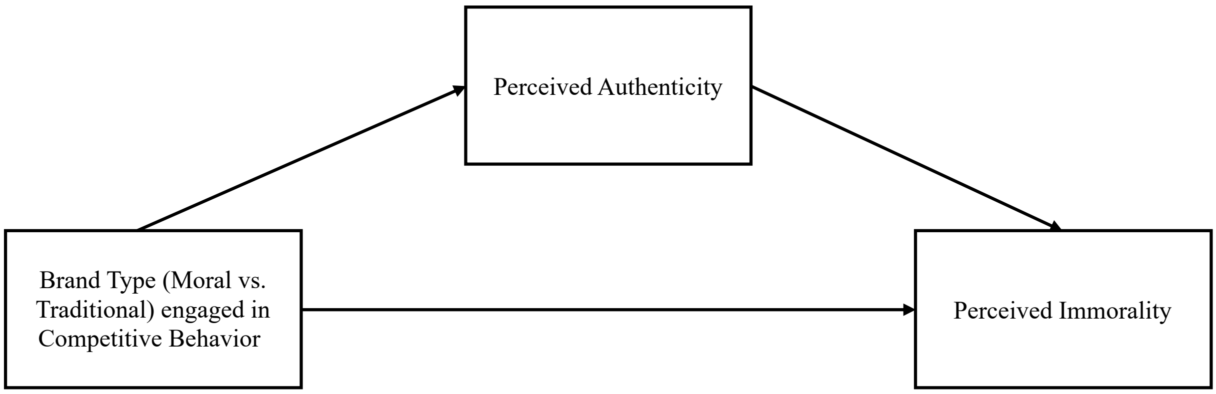

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

This study aims to explore the effect of the brand type engaging in competitive behavior on consumers' perceived immorality. In order to examine this, the independent variable will be manipulated to explore whether individuals react differently to competitive behavior carried out by a moral brand or a traditional brand. It is expected that engagement in competitive behavior by a moral brand type leads to a higher perception of immorality (H1).

Because moral brands can be judged by different standards due to their moral positioning (Foschi, 2000), competitive behavior can create a misalignment between their stated values and actions, which undermines their authenticity (H2).

The relationship between authenticity and perceived immorality is central to this process. Perceived immorality refers to consumers' judgment that a morally positioned brand has violated its ethical promises. Such violations arise not necessarily because the behavior is objectively unethical, but because it creates inconsistency between the brand's moral claims and its competitive actions (Kim et al., 2019). When moral brands engage in competitive behaviors, consumers shift their evaluation framework from viewing them as business entities pursuing profit to judging them against the moral standards the brands themselves have established. Consequently, failures are seen not simply as business mistakes but as moral betrayals, intensifying negative outcomes such as loss of trust and heightened consumer backlash (Wagner et al., 2009). Because moral brands are expected to operate according to higher standards than traditional brands, competitive behaviors are particularly problematic. When these behaviors erode authenticity, they simultaneously increase the likelihood that the same behaviors will be perceived as immoral. This creates a cascading effect where authenticity reduction directly translates into moral condemnation, making authenticity a critical mediating mechanism in consumers' responses to moral companies' competitive actions

H1: *When a moral brand engages in competitive behavior, consumers perceive it as more immoral compared to when a traditional brand engages in competitive behavior.*

H2: *When a moral brand engages in competitive behavior, consumers perceive it as less authentic compared to when a traditional brand engages in competitive behavior.*

H3: *The effect of brand type engaging in competitive behavior on perceived immorality is mediated by the perceived authenticity of the brand. When a moral brand engages in competitive behavior, consumers perceive it as less authentic compared to when a traditional brand engages in competitive behavior, leading them to be perceived as more immoral.*

4. Methodology

Design and Procedure

An online experiment employing a between-subjects design was conducted. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, and the questionnaire was distributed via Instagram and LinkedIn. In total, 174 responses were initially collected. After excluding 40 incomplete responses and 3 with unusually long completion times (over 10 minutes), which suggested a lack of engagement with the relatively short survey, the final sample consisted of 129 participants (61.2% female), aged 17 to 66 (M = 28.49*,* SD = 9.87), primarily located in German-speaking countries (e.g., Germany and Austria).

The experiment started with an introductory text, which was the same for both groups. After the introduction, participants were randomly assigned to one of two brand descriptions about the brand type. In both conditions, participants were introduced to a non-fictional brand called *Covita,* a health-oriented, organic snack and beverage company based in Bali, Indonesia.

The two brand descriptions were identical in product information but differed in moral positioning. In the moral condition (N = 63), *Covita* was described as a value-driven, socially responsible, and sustainable company. The description emphasized ethical certifications, fair labor practices, donations, and recycled packaging. In contrast, in the traditional brand (N = 66) condition, the company *Covita* was described solely as a functional, high-quality brand focused on taste and convenience (*Table 1*).

Condition 1: Moral Brand	**Condition 2: Traditional Brand**
Covita is a snack food and soft drink company based in Bali, Indonesia. The company produces high-quality beverages and protein bars using only organic ingredients. *Covita* emphasizes great taste, nutritional value, and helping consumers replace unhealthy options with better alternatives. Its products are low in sugar, made with carefully selected ingredients, and designed to support active, health-conscious lifestyles. *Covita's* products come in a wide range of flavors and are distributed across several countries. *In addition to product quality, Covita is committed to ethical and sustainable practices. The company uses 100% recycled packaging, ensures that its supply chain meets fair labor standards, and publishes regular sustainability reports to promote transparency. Covita also donates a portion of its income to support children in need and has received multiple awards for its efforts in social responsibility and environmental impact.* *Covita* positions itself as a brand that combines taste and quality with a strong commitment to ethical values and responsible business practices, while addressing consumer needs and everyday convenience.	*Covita* is a snack food and soft drink company based in Bali, Indonesia. The company produces high-quality beverages and protein bars using only organic ingredients. *Covita* emphasizes great taste, nutritional value, and helping consumers replace unhealthy options with better alternatives. Its products are low in sugar, made with carefully selected ingredients, and designed to support active, health-conscious lifestyles. *Covita's* products come in a wide range of flavors and are distributed across several countries. *Covita* positions itself as a brand that combines taste and quality with a focus on addressing consumer needs and everyday convenience.

Table 1. Stimuli

Immediately following the brand description, participants were asked to complete a simple manipulation check to verify the effectiveness of the moral framing. In both brand conditions, they rated their agreement with the statement *"Covita* is a moral brand" on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) *to* strongly agree (5).

The manipulation check showed a mean of 3.60 (SD = 0.96), indicating that participants perceived the brand as moderately moral.

After the manipulation check, all participants were exposed to the same competitive behavior in the form of a comparative advertisement (*Figure 3*). It was important that the manipulation check needed to come before the exposure of the comparative advertisement, to ensure that participants' perception of *Covita* as an ethical or traditional brand was not influenced by the ad itself. In the advertisement, *Covita* promoted one of its protein bars while directly comparing it to its competitor, *Soulara,* and criticizing it for containing many ingredients and unnecessary sugar in their snack bars. The advertisement content remained constant across conditions to isolate the effect of brand positioning.

Dependent Measure

For the measurement of *perceived immorality,* the construct of Lindenmeier et al. (2012) was used on a three-item scale (*Table 2*), consisting of the items "unfair," “unjust," and "morally wrong". After viewing the comparative advertisement, respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree*,* 7 = strongly agree).

All three items reliably measured the same underlying construct (Cronbach’s α = .89). Accordingly, the mean of the three items was calculated to create the variable *perceived immorality* (M = 3.52, SD = 1.45). Item-level means, and standard deviations were "unfair,"(M = 3.53, SD = 1.64) "unjus*t*,"(M = 3.55, SD = 1.58) and "morally wrong." (M = 3.48, SD = 1.58).

Mediation Measure

To assess *perceived authenticity* as a mediator, the study employed a five-item version of the scale developed by Wang et al. (2023) (*Table 2*). Again, participants rated their level of agreement with statements such as “authentic,” “true to its roots,” “doesn’t seem artificial,” “doesn’t try to be something it’s not,” and is “motivated by passion rather than profit” on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). This scale measured perceptions that are closely tied to consumers' evaluations of authenticity.

The scale showed good internal consistency (Cronbach’s α = .82), indicating the scale’s suitability for the analysis. Accordingly, the variables were then computed through the means of the respective items to form the construct of *perceived authenticity* (M = 4.34, SD = 1.14). Item-level descriptive statistics were: “authentic” (M = 4.61, SD = 1.42), “true to its roots” (M = 4.49, SD = 1.39), “doesn’t seem artificial” (M = 4.84, SD = 1.55), “doesn’t try to be something it’s not” (M = 4.41, SD = 1.48), and is “motivated by passion rather than profit” (M = 3.31, SD = 1.64).

At the end of the online questionnaire, participants were asked to provide information about their demographics. The questionnaire ended with a debriefing message and a thank-you message for all participants.

5. Analysis

In order to find out if the manipulation check was successful, an independent samples t-test was conducted. Participants in the moral brand condition rated *Covita* significantly higher on the item *"Covita is a moral brand"* (M = 3.89, SD = 0.86) than those in the traditional condition (M = 3.32, SD = 0.98) with respect to the manipulation check variable (t(127) = 3.51, $p < .001$, $M_{diff} = 0.57$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.89], Cohen's d = 0.62). Based on these results, the manipulation of the brand description was successful.

An independent samples t-test comparing *perceived immorality* between the moral conditions (M = 3.56*,* SD = 1.45) and the traditional brand condition (M = 3.48, SD = 1.46), revealed no statistically significant difference (t(127) = 0.32, $p = 0.752$, $M_{diff} = 0.08$, 95% CI [-0.42, 0.59], Cohen's d = -0.06). This suggests that brand type, whether moral or traditional, did not significantly influence participants' perceptions of the brand's moral behavior.

Participants in the traditional condition rated *Covita* as slightly more authentic (M = 4.47, SD = 1.02) than participants in the moral brand type condition (M = 4.19, SD = 1.25). An independent sample t-test showed that this difference was not statistically significant (t(127) = -1.36, $p = 0.177$, $M_{diff} = 0.27$, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.67], Cohen's d = 0.24). While the traditional brand was consistently perceived as more authentic, the difference was too small to be considered meaningful in statistical terms.

Mediation Analysis using PROCESS macro by Hayes (2022)

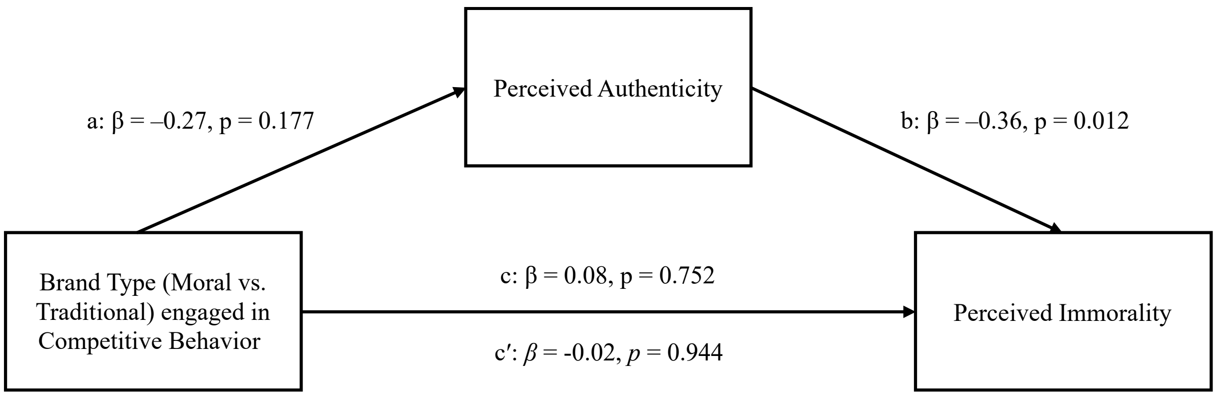

Figure 2. Conceptual Model with path coefficients illustrating the relationship between brand type and "perceived immorality", mediated by "perceived authenticity".

In order to examine whether brand type influences perceived immorality and whether this relationship is mediated by the perception of authenticity, a mediation analysis was conducted (PROCESS Model 4, Hayes, 2022).

There was no significant total effect found of brand type (traditional vs. moral) on perceived immorality, b = 0.08, SE = 0.26, t = 0.32, p = 0.752, 95% CI [-0.42, 0.59]. A simple linear regression revealed that the type of brand (traditional vs. moral) did not significantly predict perceived authenticity, b = -0.27, SE = 0.20, t = -1.36, p = 0.177, 95% CI [-0.67, 0.12]. Thus, no statistically significant effect of the independent variable on the mediator could be observed. The second path of the mediation, which represents the relationship between the mediator "perceived authenticity" and the dependent variable "perceived immorality", was significant. Within this path, perceived authenticity significantly predicted perceived immorality, b = -0.36, SE = 0.11, t = -3.32, p = 0.001, 95% CI [-0.58, -0.15], with higher authenticity associated with lower perceived immorality.

However, the direct effect of brand type on perceived immorality remained nonsignificant, b = - 0.02, SE = 0.25, t = -0.07, p = 0.944, 95% CI [-0.51, 0.47]. The indirect effect of brand type on perceived immorality via perceived authenticity was estimated at b = 0.10, 95% CI [–0.04, 0.29]. Because the confidence interval included zero, no mediation effect was supported.

Overall, these results indicate that brand type did not significantly influence perceived immorality, either directly or indirectly. Since there was no significant relationship between the independent variable (brand type) and the dependent variable (perceived immorality), there is no evidence for mediation through perceived authenticity.

6. General Discussion

6.1. Summary of the Findings

This study aimed to examine whether morally positioned brands are judged more harshly than traditional brands when engaging in the same competitive behavior. Drawing on *Double Standard Theory* (Foschi, 2000), it was hypothesized that competitive behavior would be perceived as a moral violation, particularly for moral brands. It was further expected that this effect would be mediated by perceived authenticity.

The outcome of the experimental study showed that participants saw *Covita* as either a moral or traditional brand; therefore, the manipulation succeeded. However, participants of the experimental study did not judge the moral brand more harshly than the traditional brand for engaging in the same comparative advertising. Additionally, no support for authenticity as a mediator was found, which means that the mediator did not statistically carry the effect from brand type to perceived immorality. Nonetheless, perceived authenticity was negatively associated with immorality perceptions, suggesting that brands perceived as more authentic also tended to be judged as less immoral.

6.2. Limitation

Ambiguous transgressions inherently create room for interpretation (Blanken et al., 2015). In the experiment, consumers might not have perceived the selection of competitive behavior as a transgression. As Antonetti & Maklan (2016) argue, minor issues may not be classified as immoral unless they reach a certain severity that significantly affects stakeholders. Severe unethical incidents provoke stronger emotional reactions and are consequently harder to forgive (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2015). Therefore, the comparative advertisement used as a potential transgression might have been perceived as too commonplace and insufficiently salient to trigger perceptions of immorality (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016; Tsarenko & Tojib, 2015; Ingram et al., 2005).

Moreover, the experiment conducted for this study relied on a short brand description to serve as the basis for measuring perceived authenticity. However, previous research indicates that consumers' evaluations of brand authenticity depend on a complex set of cues and expectations (Morhart et al., 2015; Moulard et al., 2021; Napoli et al., 2014). These include cues such as genuineness (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020), staying true to one's roots and identity (Moulard et al., 2021), and acting by one's stated mission (Morhart et al., 2015). Additionally, factors such as brand heritage, commitment to a brand’s long-held traditions, passion for craftsmanship, and quality commitment are also essential indicators of authenticity (Napoli et al., 2014; Beverland et al., 2008). When consumers base their perceptions of authenticity on these factors, authenticity perceptions may not be sufficiently captured in the experimental study.

Competitive behavior was selected in this study because it can undermine authenticity perceptions through multiple pathways. First, such tactics may call into question a brand’s integrity by appearing inconsistent with its stated ethical values, potentially signaling hypocrisy. Second, they may erode credibility by implying that prior moral commitments were primarily strategic rather than deeply held. Furthermore, competitive actions introduce ambiguity regarding the brand’s true intentions, suggesting that profit, rather than purpose, may be the primary driver. This perceived shift from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation poses a direct threat to how authentic the brand is perceived to be. Yet, when translating this logic into the present study, capturing such effects empirically proved difficult. Many of these key authenticity factors require long-term consumer exposure to create a strong opinion on brand authenticity (Bruhn et al., 2012; Schallehn et al., 2014). Participants in the present experiment had limited familiarity with the brand and only encountered it through a brief textual description. This limitation particularly affects factors such as continuity, defined as "the brand's history and stability over time" (Morhart et al., 2015, p. 202), and credibility, which involves delivering on brand promises (Morhart et al., 2015). Although the study mentioned brand commitments such as "fair labor practices" and "donations to children in need," participants lacked the means to verify these claims based on just a single behavioral instance.

Furthermore, visual and contextual elements play a significant role in shaping authenticity perceptions (Wang et al., 2023; Beverland et al., 2008). Wang et al. (2023) highlight that brand intentions are often inaccessible to consumers, leading them to rely on other extrinsic cues such as product packaging, visual storytelling, and social media presence (Wang et al., 2023; Beverland et al., 2008). It could have been that participants did not recognize the brand's intention sufficiently from the experimental stimuli and therefore struggled to form accurate authenticity assessments. The same comparative advertisement shown in both conditions may have acted as a dominant authenticity cue and overshadowed the brand description. This could explain why perceived authenticity did not differ meaningfully between the moral and traditional brand conditions.

Snack bars are typically classified as low-involvement products (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018). As previously discussed, authenticity often encompasses dimensions such as craftsmanship, original history, and heritage (Napoli et al., 2014; Beverland et al., 2008). However, low-involvement products lack these inherent and objective authenticity cues (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018). Snack bars are mass-produced items, purchased without extensive consideration, leading consumers to potentially overlook deeper authenticity signals. According to Dwivedi & McDonald (2018), authenticity perceptions in low-involvement categories become significant only under specific conditions, such as when a product category holds personal meaning for consumers or when brands have successfully established strong identity-based connections. In this study, the unknown brand may not have reached that level of relevance, making authenticity judgments weaker or less consistent. This could explain why the expected mediation effect was not observed.

Companies often benefit from cultivating a positive moral image, particularly by shielding themselves from criticism (Klein & Dawar, 2004) and mitigating perceptions of hypocrisy (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2015). This phenomenon is referred to as the "halo effect", wherein a brand's prosocial behaviors positively influence overall product evaluations (Loaiza-Ramírez et al., 2022; Chernev & Blair, 2015). When specific product-related information is absent or ambiguous, consumers frequently rely on general brand impressions. If these impressions incorporate strong elements of social responsibility or ethical identity, they can positively influence consumers' broader evaluations and decision-making processes. Supporting this idea, Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) found that engaging in socially responsible behavior improves overall consumer attitudes toward a brand. Additionally, Kim and Park (2020) suggest that consumers may experience gratitude for previous socially responsible actions, thereby enhancing perceptions of trustworthiness toward the brand. In the context of the present study, participants exposed to the morally framed brand description likely developed favorable general impressions of *Covita.* This favorable perception might have buffered or neutralized negative reactions to the comparative advertisement. The experiment's results would align with these findings, suggesting consumers might not necessarily hold moral brands to higher standards in all contexts. Therefore, the brand's moral framing could have justified the behavior in the eyes of the consumers.

6.3. Implications

This study contributes to the growing body of research on companies with a social and moral identity (Dees, 2018; Ferrell et al., 2019; Campbell & Winterich, 2018), as well as to the field of business ethics, by examining moral transgressions as the counterpart to moral behavior (Xu et al., 2021; Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013; Grappi et al., 2013). As existing literature shows consumers increasingly expect companies to act in moral and socially responsible ways (Campbell & Winterich, 2018), however, when these expectations are violated, they often respond with heightened negative emotions and reputational backlash (Fediuk et al., 2010; Lindenmeier et al., 2012). In light of this, it is essential to understand how morally positioned brands navigate the tension between their social mission and commercial objectives.

Firstly, the study addresses a fundamental strategic question of whether moral companies should avoid certain competitive behaviors that traditional companies might employ without consequence. Social and moral positioning strategies represent a significant commitment for companies (Einwiller et al., 2019). This raises the critical question of whether moral companies can operate under similar competitive terms as traditional companies, or whether their moral positioning constrains their strategic options.

The findings of the experiment did not provide evidence that comparative advertising was judged as more immoral when performed by a moral brand. However, these tactics can occupy an ambiguous space since they can be misleading and aggressive, as well as consumers perceive it as unfair (Dröge, 1989). Effron and Monin (2010) argue that moral licensing effects break down when transgressions are clear and obvious; by contrast, ambiguous or moderate actions may still be tolerated. This suggests that moral brands may be able to employ specific competitive tactics without severe consequences, as long as the behavior is not blatantly unethical or contradictory to their core values, for instance, engaging in direct attacks founded on false claims.

Additionally, this study examines the role of perceived authenticity as a potential mechanism in how consumers evaluate ambiguous competitive behaviors of morally positioned brands. Authenticity is an important decision factor for consumers in evaluating brands (Gilmore & Pine, 2007) and requires consistency over time (Morhart et al., 2015; Beverland et al., 2008). Therefore, managers should strive to align a brand's image with its core values to foster perceptions of authenticity. This alignment could strengthen credibility and potentially buffer against negative interpretation. In this study, perceived authenticity was negatively associated with immorality perceptions, suggesting that brands seen as more authentic tend to be judged as less immoral or, conversely, that brands judged as less immoral may also be perceived as more authentic.

Beverland et al. (2008) also emphasize that advertising plays a crucial role in strengthening brand authenticity. As such, companies should focus on creating authentic advertisements rather than communications that might contradict their moral positioning. While this study did not find evidence that moral brands were perceived as less authentic than traditional brands when using comparative advertising, authenticity was negatively correlated with immorality perceptions. This suggests that maintaining authenticity remains important, as higher authenticity is associated with more favorable moral evaluations, and managers should remain cautious, as inconsistencies between brand narratives and actions in other contexts could still erode perceptions of authenticity over time.

Furthermore, by investigating competitive behavior, the research adds to ambiguous transgression and moral licensing (Blanken et al., 2015). The findings did not provide evidence that consumers judged moral brands more negatively than traditional brands when both engaged in a behavior with unclear ethical valence. This may suggest that ambiguous actions are not automatically viewed as transgressions simply because they are performed by moral brands.

6.4. Future Research

The findings did not support the initial hypotheses, which suggests that more complex dynamics explain the conditions under which moral companies can operate and under which they cannot. This also opens important directions for future research.

One promising direction involves revisiting the brand exposure method. Rather than relying on a single brief brand description and one-time exposure, future studies could use well-known brands or provide participants with richer background information on a brand's history, mission, and values. Since authenticity judgments are often based on such long-term cues of consistency and continuity (Morhart et al., 2015; Beverland et al., 2008), this approach would allow for a more realistic assessment of how consumers evaluate whether competitive actions align with a brand's moral identity.

It would also be valuable to expand the scope beyond comparative advertising and investigate other forms of competitive behavior to determine whether competition in general poses problems for moral companies. For example, studies could investigate competitive pricing strategies, market entry tactics, or customer acquisition methods that aim to draw customers away from rivals. This would help determine whether the effects are specific to comparative advertising or represent broader competitive constraints for moral companies. For instance, studies on dynamic pricing show that such strategies can be perceived as unfair (Xia & Monroe, 2010), suggesting that future work could explore how moral firms are evaluated when engaging in similar tactics.

Moreover, exploring cross-cultural differences regarding comparative tactics and moral evaluation could significantly deepen the understanding of these dynamics. Since cultures maintain different standards for morality and acceptable business practices, such research could provide insights into how universal or culture-specific these effects are (Husted & Allen, 2008). This is particularly relevant for global branding strategies, where companies must navigate varying cultural expectations of moral behavior across markets. For example, comparative advertising is well established and widely accepted in the United States, where it is considered an informative and legitimate competitive tactic (Schwaiger et al., 2007). By contrast, in many East Asian countries, such as Japan or China, comparative ads are seen as too direct or even legally restricted, and in several European countries, they were historically banned because they were perceived as offensive or misleading (Boddewyn, 1988, as cited in Schwaiger et al., 2007; Donthu, 1998). Such differences suggest that competitive behavior that is tolerated in one cultural context may be judged as morally inappropriate in another. This is particularly relevant for global branding strategies, where companies must navigate varying cultural expectations of moral behavior across markets.

Another line of inquiry could examine the role of product type, particularly whether consumers' responses vary depending on the level of product involvement or category relevance. Sheeraz et al. (2018) emphasize that product involvement, defined as the personal relevance and self-congruence associated with a product, plays a central role in shaping emotional brand attachment. Their findings suggest that hedonic, high-involvement products such as luxury or aspirational goods evoke stronger attachment because they align with consumers' ideal self-concept, which in turn intensifies emotional reactions. By contrast, utilitarian, low-involvement products such as snack foods tend to elicit weaker attachment and lower emotional engagement, which could potentially make consumers less sensitive to brand transgressions. Building on this, future research could investigate whether moral positioning has stronger effects in high-involvement categories, where attachment and self-congruence play a more central role in consumer–brand relationships.

7. Conclusion

The example of Tony's Chocolonely illustrates both the opportunities and tensions of adopting a moral identity. Beyond its commercial success, the brand has positioned itself around the elimination of child labor, making social responsibility central to its brand (Tony's Chocolonely n.d.). The 2024 campaign that mimicked competitor packaging demonstrates the blurring line between competition and behavior that may be perceived as unfair. Tony's defended the campaign as necessary to raise awareness (Gruet, 2024). Yet whether such actions are interpreted as routine business practice or as contradictions to a moral stance underscores the broader challenge moral companies face in balancing ethical commitments with competitive pressures.

This study explored that question by examining whether moral brands face stronger negative evaluations than traditional brands when engaging in comparative tactics, and whether authenticity mediates this relationship. The experimental results did not support the initial hypotheses; thus, moral and traditional brands were evaluated similarly in the context of comparative advertising, and authenticity did not mediate the relationship.

Despite these outcomes, the research question remains relevant. Perceived morality has gained prominence in both corporate strategy and consumer decision-making (Campbell & Winterich, 2018). At the same time, consumers increasingly seek brands that reflect their values; thus, authenticity has emerged as a defining factor in purchase decisions, often surpassing traditional considerations such as quality, cost, and availability (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Furthermore, authenticity strengthens consumer trust, enhances brand equity, and fosters deeper emotional attachment (Morhart et al., 2015; Moulard et al., 2016). On the other hand, competitive pressures have intensified the use of competitive methods such as comparative advertising as companies seek differentiation and market attention in increasingly saturated environments (Coffee, 2025). This convergence creates a fundamental tension in contemporary marketing practice between authentic moral positioning and everyday competitive strategies. By testing this tension experimentally, the study underscores the difficulty of isolating when and how moral positioning becomes a liability, and points to the need for future research to identify the boundary conditions under which moral brands may face greater scrutiny.

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9. Appendices

Appendix A. Adopted Scales

CONSTRUCT	ITEMS
PERCEIVED IMMORALITY	"I consider the behavior of the company '*Covita*' to be unfair." "I consider the behavior of the company '*Covita'* to be unjust." "I consider the behavior of the company '*Covita'* to be morally wrong."
BRAND AUTHENTICITY	"*Covita* is authentic." "*Covita* is true to its roots." "*Covita* doesn't seem artificial." "*Covita* doesn't try to be something it's not." "*Covita* is motivated by passion rather than profit."

Table 2. Items of adopted scales

Appendix B. Questionnaire

For the purpose of the experiment, existing snack bars were used. Due to possible copyright issues, the pictures of the bars are blurred.

[INTRODUCTION]

Dear participant,

As part of my master's thesis at the Institute of Marketing at the University of Vienna, I am conducting a study on consumer behavior.

You will need about 2 minutes to answer the questionnaire.

The following questions are about your personal and, above all, honest opinion. There are no right or wrong answers. Some questions or possible answers will seem very similar to you. Please do not let this confuse you. The questionnaire is completely anonymous. Your answers will be treated in strict confidence and will not be passed on to third parties.

If you have any questions, please contact: Lana Knof (a12228636@unet.univie.ac.at)

Thank you in advance for your support and your time!

Note: If you are using your mobile phone to complete the questionnaire, please switch to landscape mode for better readability.

[PARTICIPATION CONSENT CHECK]

Do you want to participate in the study? If not, you are redirected directly to the end of the survey.

Yes, I want to participate.
No, I don't want to participate.

[MORAL CONDITION]

Covita is a snack food and soft drink company based in Bali, Indonesia.

The company produces high-quality beverages and protein bars using only organic ingredients. ***Covita*** emphasizes great taste, nutritional value, and helping consumers replace unhealthy options with better alternatives. Its products are low in sugar, made with carefully selected ingredients, and designed to support active, health-conscious lifestyles. ***Covita's*** products come in a wide range of flavors and are distributed across several countries.

In addition to product quality, ***Covita*** is committed to ethical and sustainable practices. The company uses 100% recycled packaging, ensures that its supply chain meets fair labor standards, and publishes regular sustainability reports to promote transparency. ***Covita*** also donates a portion of its income to support children in need and has received multiple awards for its efforts in social responsibility and environmental impact.

Covita positions itself as a brand that combines taste and quality with a strong commitment to ethical values and responsible business practices, while addressing consumer needs and everyday convenience.

[TRADITIONAL CONDITION]

Covita is a snack food and soft drink company based in Bali, Indonesia.

The company produces high-quality beverages and protein bars using only organic ingredients. ***Covita*** emphasizes great taste, nutritional value, and helping consumers replace unhealthy options with better alternatives. Its products are low in sugar, made with carefully selected ingredients, and designed to support active, health-conscious lifestyles. ***Covita's*** products come in a wide range of flavors and are distributed across several countries.

Covita positions itself as a brand that combines taste and quality with a focus on addressing consumer needs and everyday convenience.

[MANIPULATION CHECK]

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
"Covita is a moral brand."	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

[AD]

Figure 3. Comparative Advertisement created with Canva

[PERCIVED MORALITY]

To what extent do you agree with the following statement? "I consider the behavior of Covita to be...

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
... unfair."	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
... unjust."	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
... morally wrong."	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

[PERCIVED AUTHENTICITY]

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about *Covita*?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
"Covita is authentic."	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
"Covita is true to its roots."	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
"Covita does not seem artificial."	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
"Covita does not try to be something it's not."	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
"Covita is motivated by passion rather than profit."	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

[DEMOGRAPHICS]

What is your gender?

1. Female
2. Male
3. Other (specify) ___________

What is your age?

Appendix C. Assumption Testing

Assumption for T-Tests for Manipulation Check

Since the data contained outliers and many tied values, Kendall's tau was used instead of an independent samples t-test (Field, 2024). Results showed that participants in the moral brand condition rated *Covita* significantly higher on the manipulation check item (Mdn = 4.00) than those in the traditional condition (Mdn = 3.00), $\tau = .27$, $p < .001$, indicating a small to medium effect (Field, 2024). Thus, the manipulation was successful. Normality was assessed using Q–Q plots, and outliers were identified with boxplots.

			"Covita is a moral brand."	**Brand type**
Kendall's tau_b	"Covita is a moral brand."	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	$.273^{**}$
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<.001
		N	129	129
	Brand type	Correlation Coefficient	$.273^{**}$	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.
		N	129	129

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Kendall's Tau results for the manipulation check

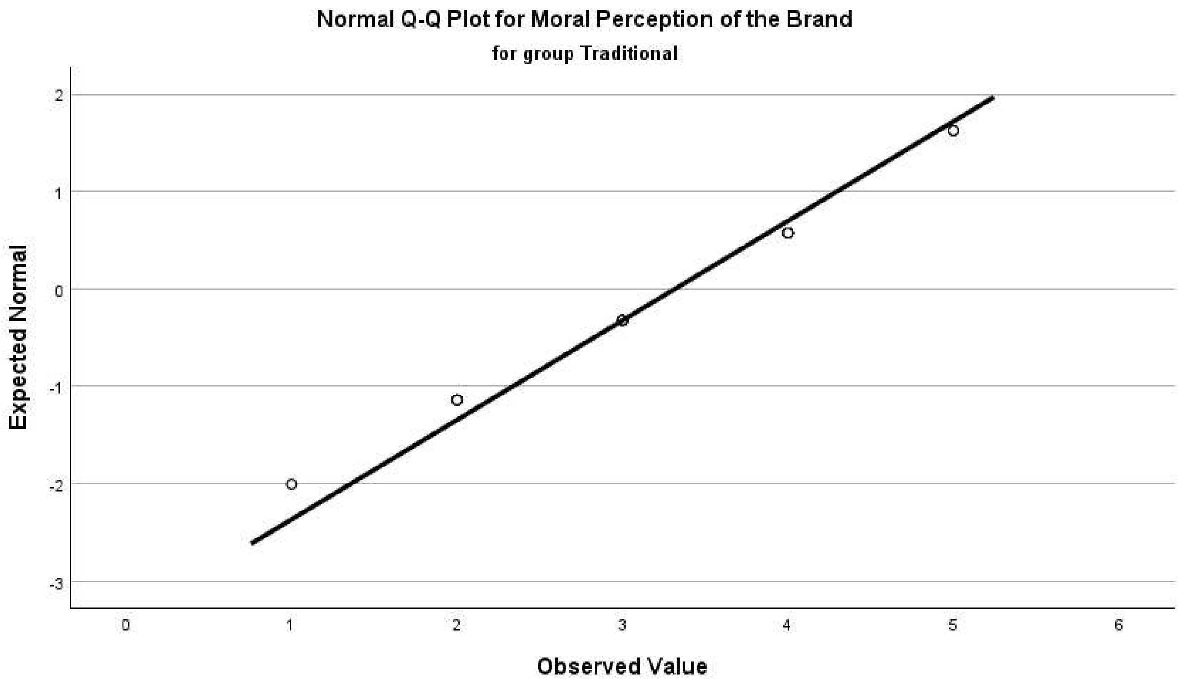

Figure 4. QQ-Plot to assess normality of the traditional group for the manipulation check. On the left, a slight deviation from normality can be observed

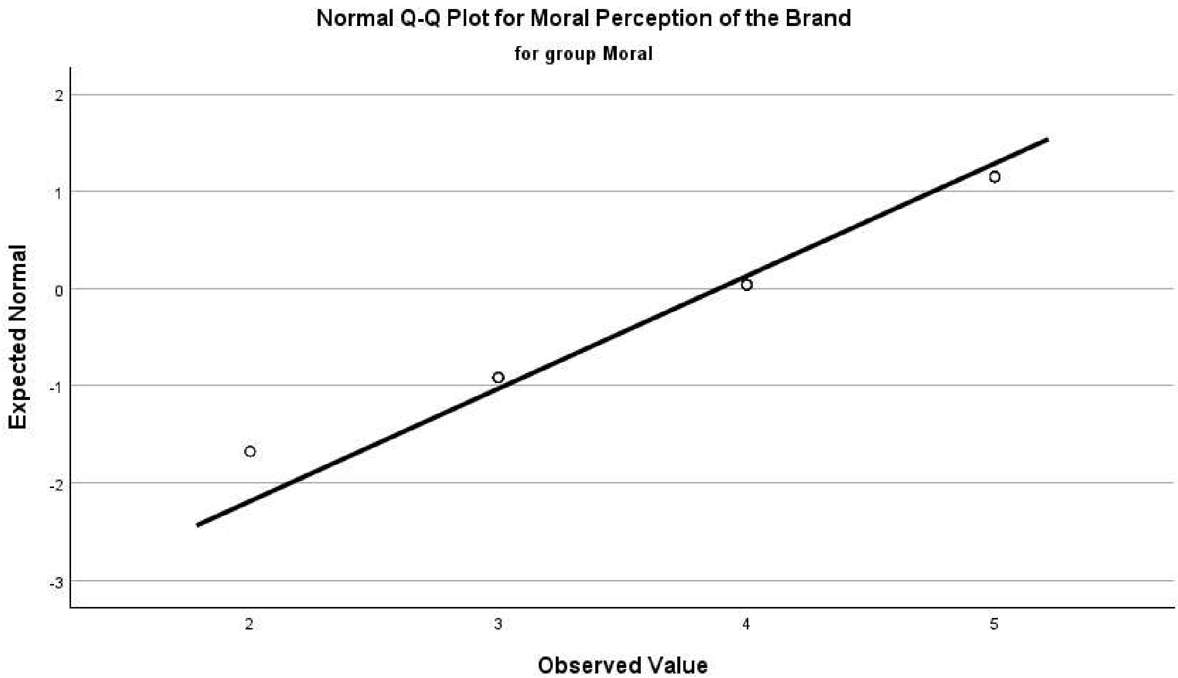

Figure 5. QQ-Plot to assess the normality of the moral group for the manipulation check. On the left, a slight deviation from normality can be observed.

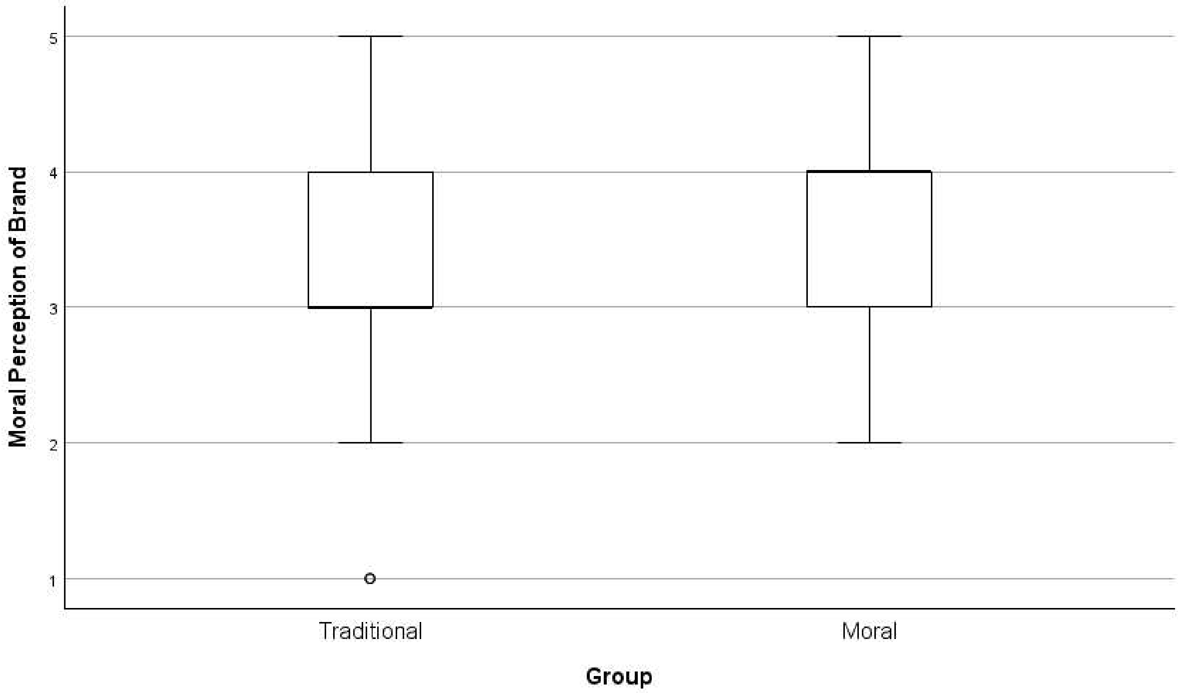

Figure 6. Boxplots for the perception of immorality of the brand for each group. Within the traditional group, an outlier can be observed.

Assumption for Perceived Immorality

To ensure the assumptions for conducting an independent samples t-test were met, the data were examined for normality and outliers. Normality was assessed using Q–Q plots for both groups (*Figures 7 and Figure 8*), and potential outliers were examined with boxplots (*Figure 9*). The data were approximately normally distributed, and no outliers were detected. As a result, an independent samples t-test was conducted. Because a Welch's t-test was used (*Table18*), which adjusts for unequal variances, the assumption of equal variances (homoscedasticity) was not of concern (Field, 2024).

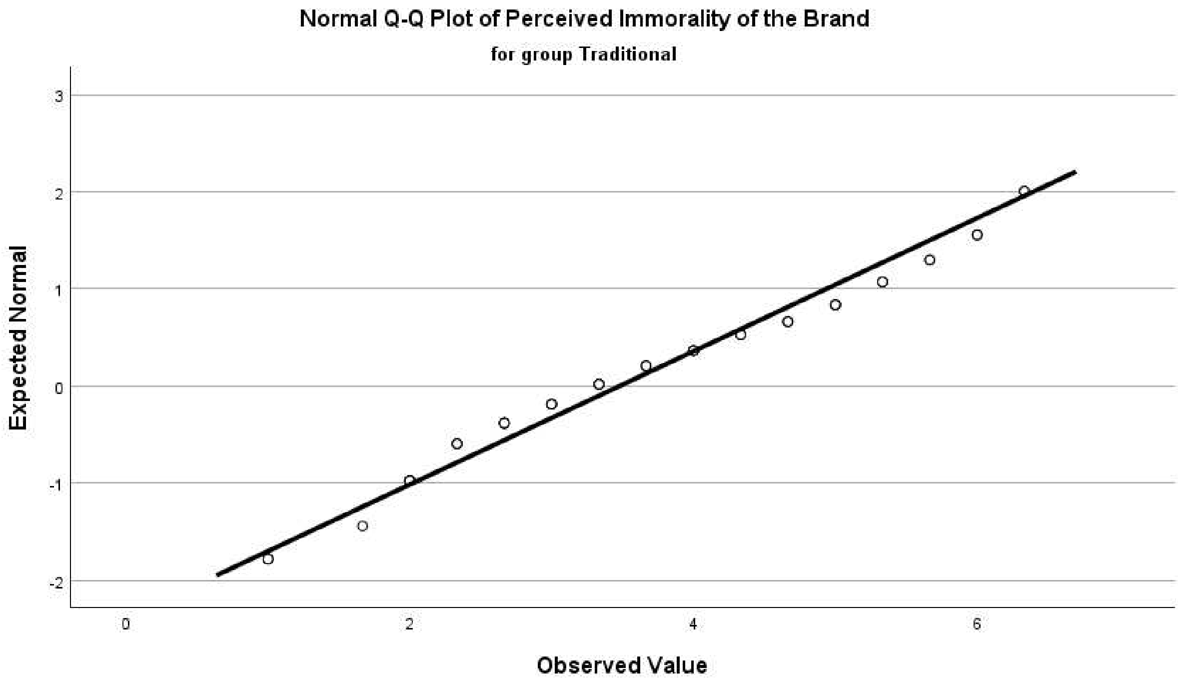

Figure 7. QQ-Plot to assess normality of the traditional group for perceived immorality.

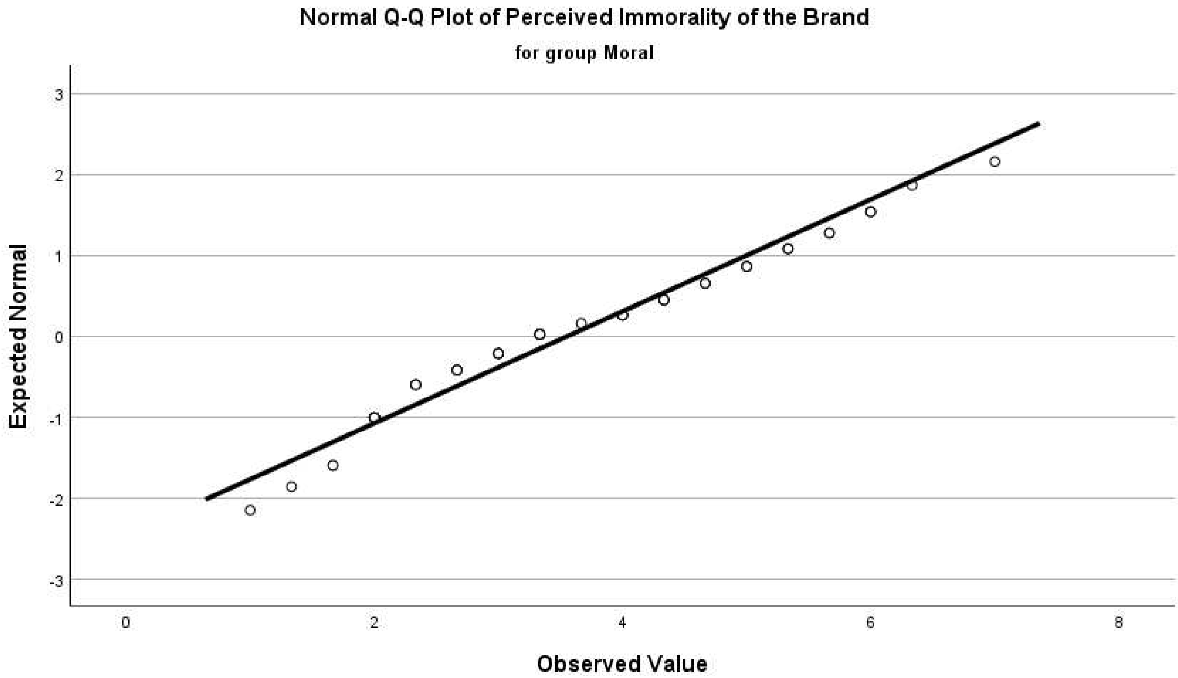

Figure 8. QQ-Plot to assess normality of the moral group for the perceived immorality.

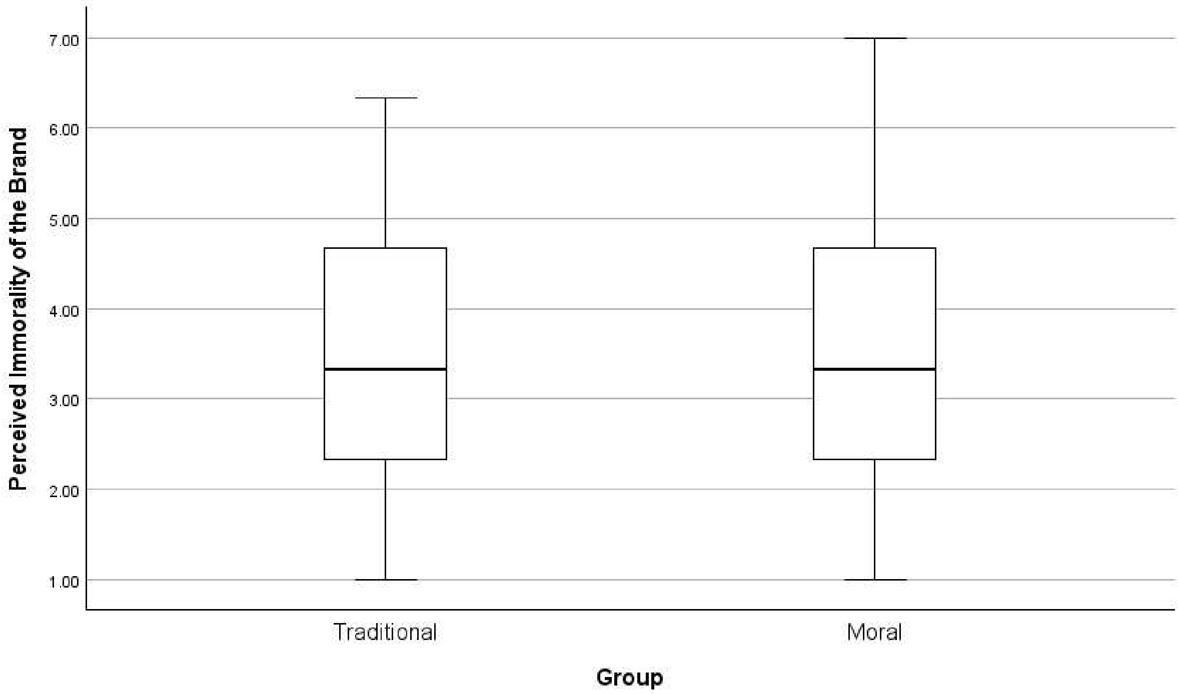

Figure 9. Boxplots showing perceived immorality ratings by group; no outliers were detected.

Assumption for Perceived Authenticity

To evaluate the assumptions for the t-test on perceived authenticity, normality and the presence of outliers were assessed. Normality was examined using Q–Q plots for both the traditional and moral conditions (*Figure 10 and Figure 11*). Additionally, boxplots were inspected to identify potential outliers (*Figure 12*).

Given that the sample sizes exceeded 30 per group, the *Central Limit Theorem* applies, which justifies the use of parametric tests such as the independent samples t-test even if minor violations of normality exist (Field, 2024). Accordingly, an independent samples t-test was conducted.

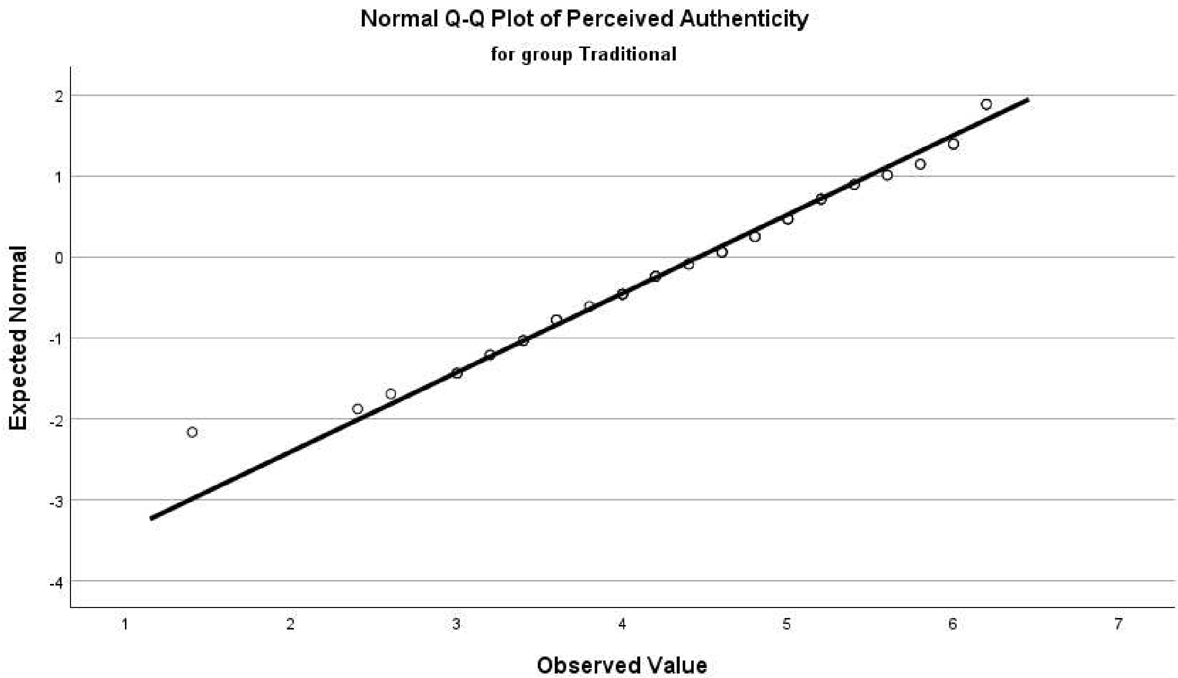

Figure 10. QQ-Plot to assess normality of perceived authenticity for the traditional condition. On the left, a slight deviation from normality can be observed.

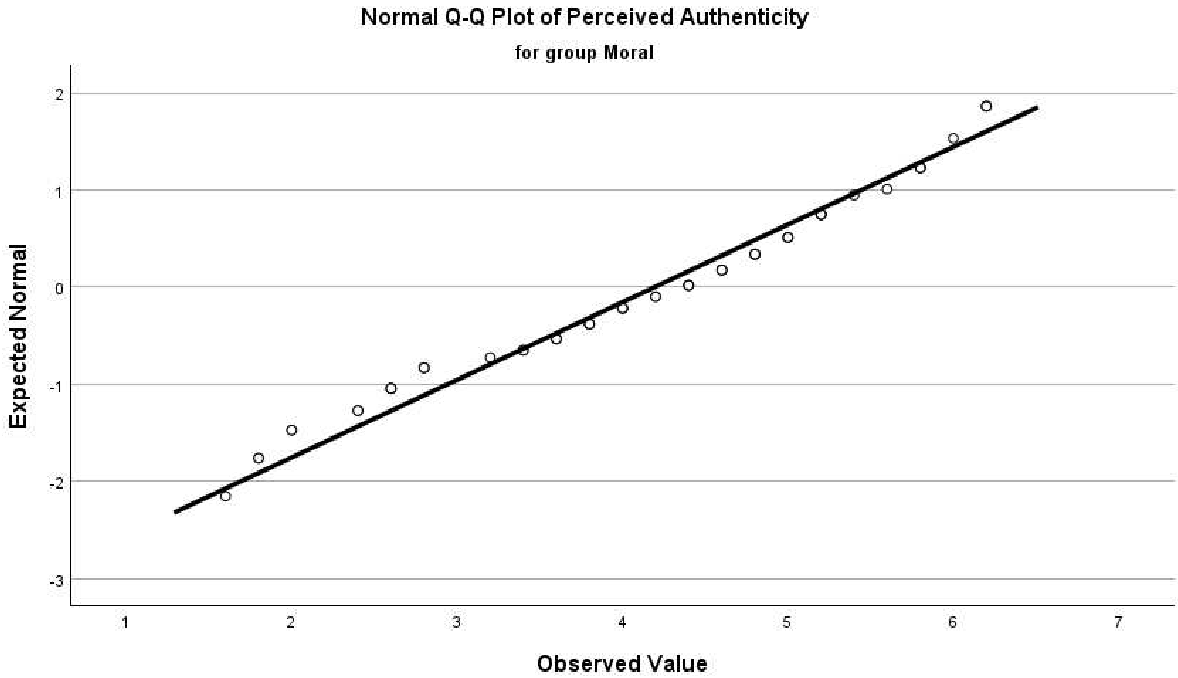

Figure 11. QQ-Plot to assess normality for the perceived authenticity of the moral condition.

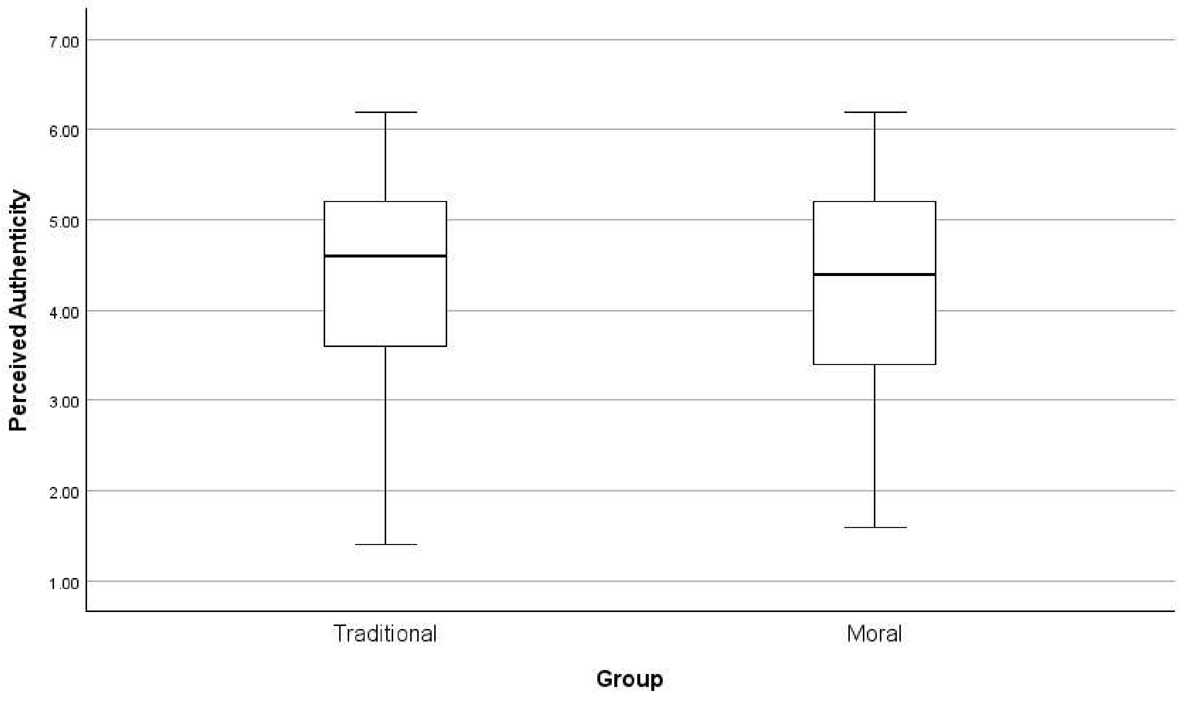

Figure 12. Boxplots of perceived authenticity across brand conditions.

Assumption for Regression

For the mediation analysis, the assumptions of regression were examined, including independence, linearity, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, and normality (Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022).

Multicollinearity was assessed by inspecting the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) scores, with all values well below the critical threshold of 10 (see PROCESS output) (Field, 2024). Additionally, influential cases were evaluated using Cook's distance, with all values below the recommended cutoff of 1, suggesting no problematic outliers (Field, 2024).

Linearity is satisfied when the independent variables are linearly related to the dependent variable, meaning that increases or decreases in the predictors are associated with corresponding increases or decreases in the outcome (Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022). This assumption was evaluated using scatterplots, where a roughly straight-line pattern indicates linearity (Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022).

The assumption of homoscedasticity requires that the variance of the errors remains constant across all levels of the independent variables (Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022). Linearity and homoscedasticity were jointly assessed through scatterplots of predicted values and standardized residuals, which showed no major violations (Field, 2024).

Normality of residuals was assessed using Q–Q plots, which indicated approximate normality and supported the robustness of the regression analysis (Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022; Field, 2024).

The independence assumption requires that residuals are not correlated with one another and is typically tested using the Durbin–Watson statistic, with values between 1.5 and 2.5 indicating independence (Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022). However, this assumption was not assessed here, as the data contained no temporal structure (Field, 2024).

			Statistic	Std. Error
Standardized Residual	Mean		.0000000	.08735453
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	-.1728459	
		Upper Bound	.1728459	
	5% Trimmed Mean		-.0231601	
	Median		-.1220099	
	Variance		.984	
	Std. Deviation		.99215674	
	Minimum		-2.10135	
	Maximum		2.72067	
	Range		4.82201	
	Interquartile Range		1.57903	
	Skewness		.371	.213
	Kurtosis		-.587	.423
Cook's Distance	Mean		.0076759	.00082920
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	.0060351	
		Upper Bound	.0093166	
	5% Trimmed Mean		.0063759	
	Median		.0049573	
	Variance		.000	
	Std. Deviation		.00941793	
	Minimum		.00000	
	Maximum		.05677	
	Range		.05676	
	Interquartile Range		.00961	
	Skewness		2.587	.213
	Kurtosis		8.869	.423

Table 4. Cook's Distance and Standardized Residuals for Detection of Influential Cases

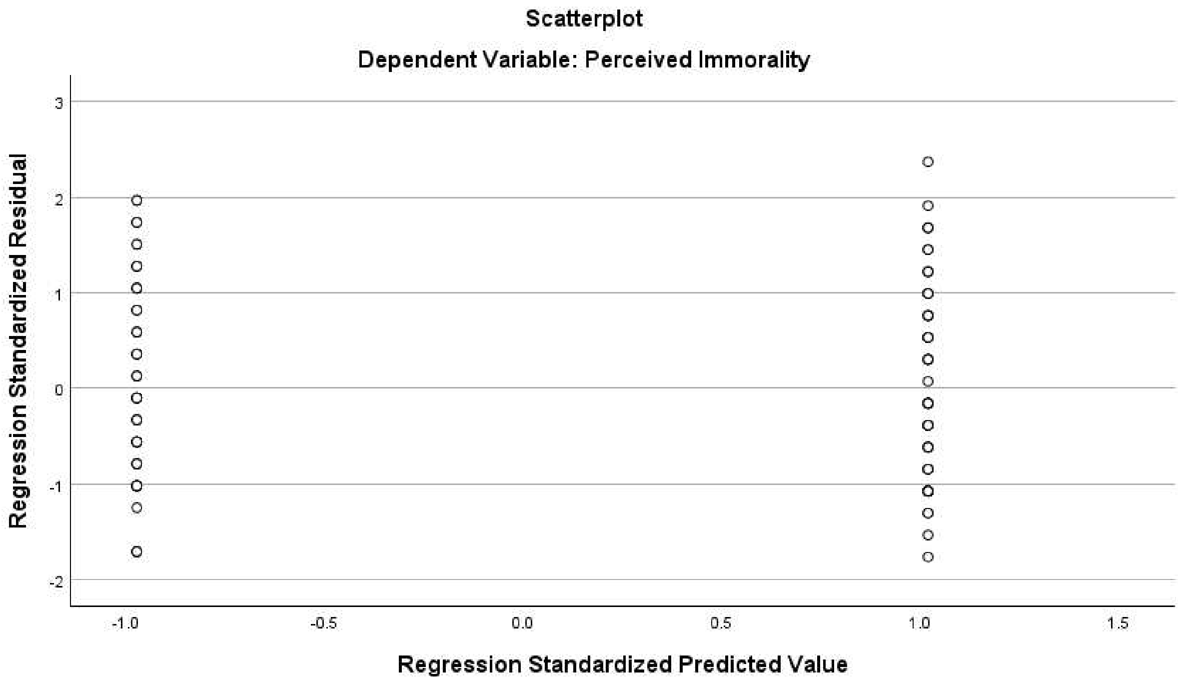

Figure 13. Plot of predicted values and standardized residuals for the regression model with the predictor group and the dependent variable, perceived immorality of the brand. The two groups show similar variance.

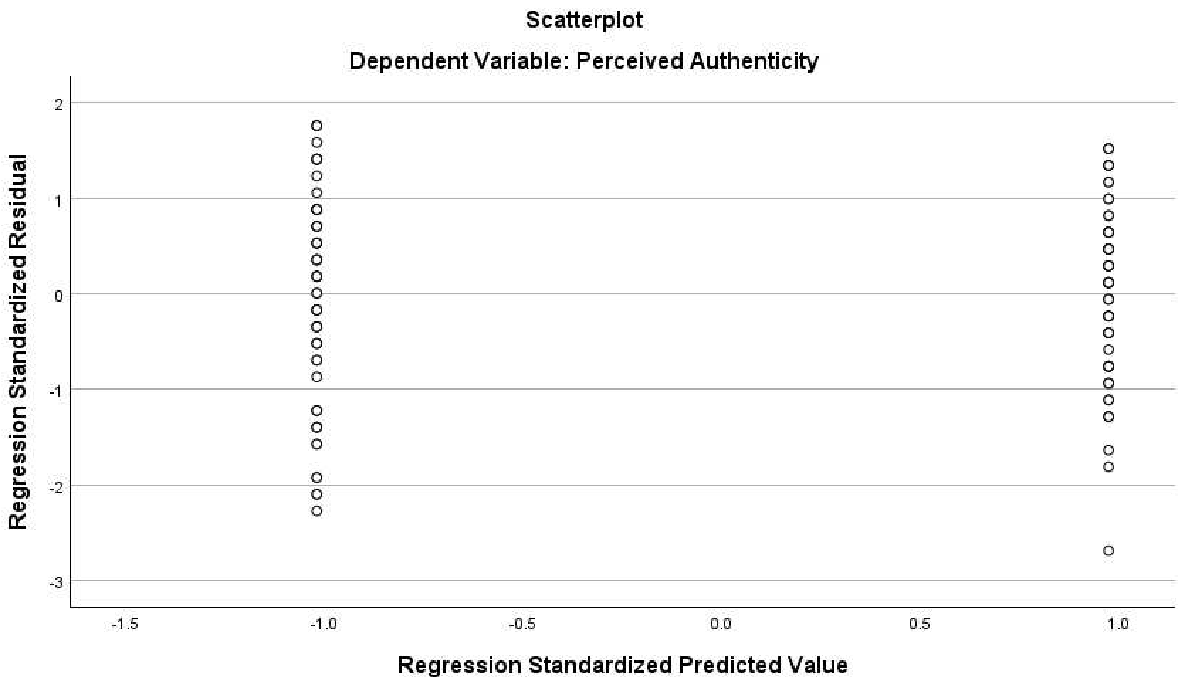

Figure 14. Plot of predicted values and standardized residuals for the regression model with the predictor group and perceived authenticity of the brand. The two groups show similar variance.

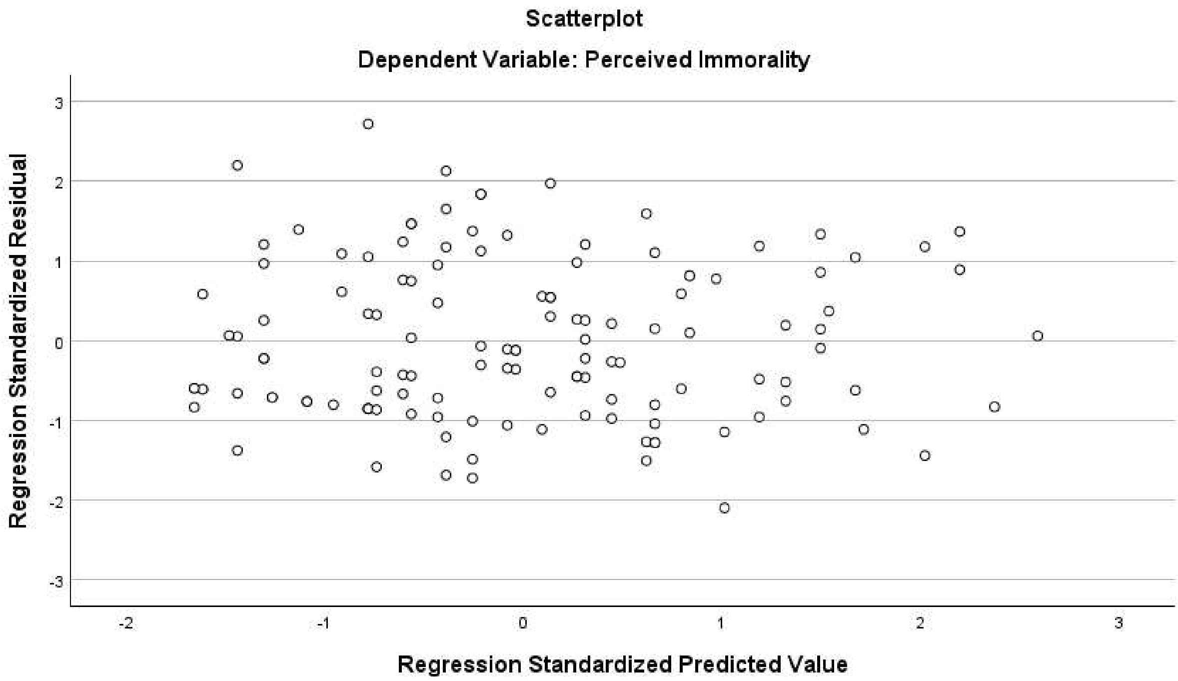

Figure 15. *Plot of predicted values and standardized residuals for the regression model with the predictors group, perceived authenticity, and perceived immorality. There are cone-shaped patterns or nonlinear curve patterns in the diagram; therefore, there are no signs of heteroskedasticity or non-linearity.*

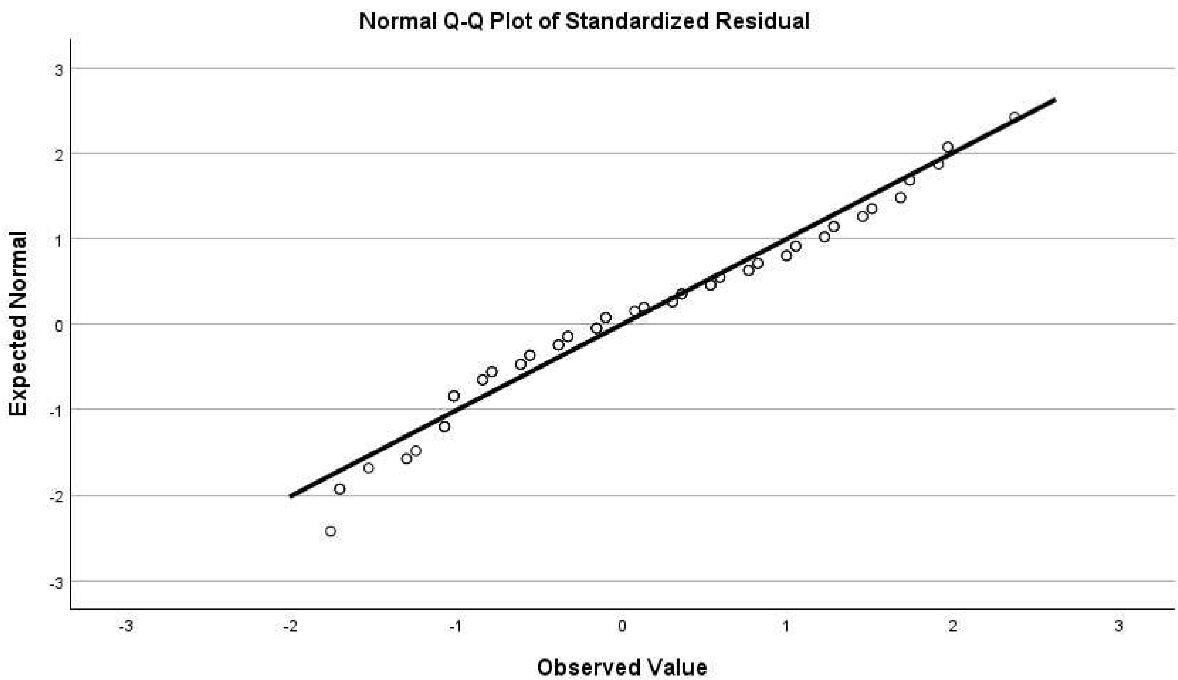

Figure 16. *QQ-Plot of standardized residuals for the regression model with the predictors brand type and the dependent variable perceived immorality. Even though there are slight deviations, the data seems normal.*

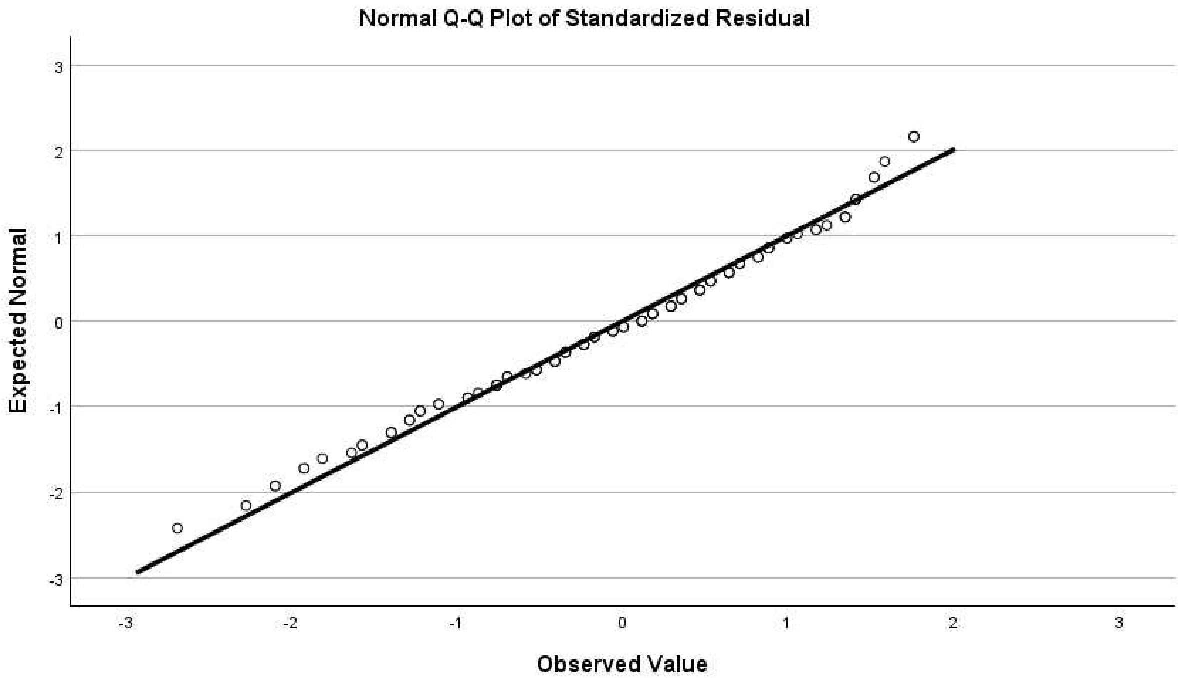

Figure 17. QQ-Plot of standardized residuals for the regression model with the predictors brand type and perceived authenticity. Even though there are slight deviations, the data seem normal.

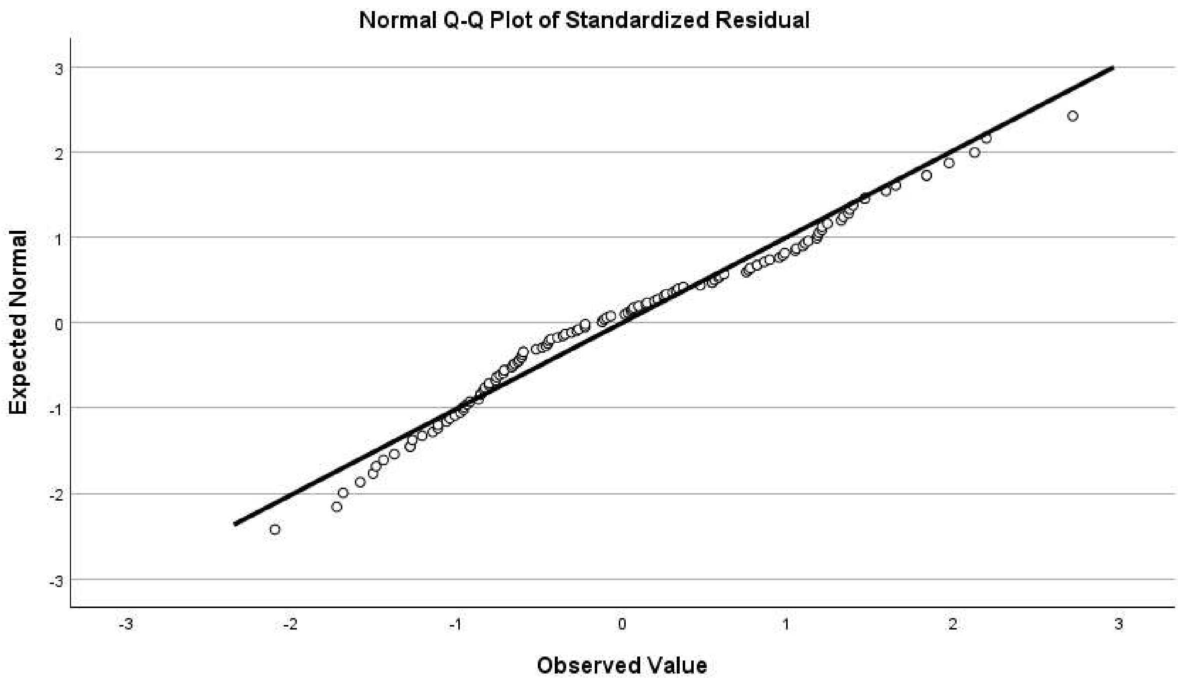

Figure 18. QQ-Plot of standardized residuals for the regression model with the predictors brand type and perceived authenticity with the variable perceived immorality. Even though there are slight deviations, the data seem normal.

Appendix D. SPSS Output

Demographics

Gender		Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Valid	Female	80	60.6	60.6	60.6
	Male	52	39.4	39.4	100.0
	Total	**132**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Table 5. Gender distribution among all participants who reported their gender (N=132)

Statistics	Age
Mean	28.73
Std. Deviation	10.19
Minimum	17
Maximum	66

Table 6. Age distribution among all participants who reported their age (N=132)

Gender		Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Valid	Female	79	61.2	61.2	61.2
	Male	50	38.8	38.8	100.0
	Total	**129**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Table 7. Gender distribution among participants after data elimination (N=129)

Statistics	Age
Mean	28.49
Std. Error of Mean	0.87
Median	26.00
Std. Deviation	9.87
Minimum	17
Maximum	66

Table 8. Age distribution among all participants after data elimination (N=129)

Mean of Scale Items

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Perceived Immorality	129	1.00	7.00	3.52	1.45	2.09
Perceived Authenticity	129	1.40	6.20	4.34	1.14	1.31

Table 9. Descriptive Statistics for Scale Means (N = 129)

Manipulation Check

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
"Covita is a moral brand."	129	1	5	3.60	0.96

Table 10. Descriptive Statistics for Manipulation Check Items (N=129)

Conditions	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Median
moral	63	3.89	0.86	0.11	4
traditional	66	3.32	0.98	0.12	3

Table 11. Group Statistics Manipulation Check: Moral vs. Traditional Conditions.

	T	df	p (one-tailed)	p (two-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Equal variances assumed	3.51	127	<.001	<.001	0.57	0.16	0.25	0.89
Equal variances not assumed	3.512	126.22	<.001	<.001	0.57	0.16	0.25	0.89

Table 12. Independent Sample t-test for Manipulation Check.

Measure	Value	Point Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Cohen's d	0.92	0.62	0.26	0.97
Hedges' correction	0.93	0.61	0.26	0.96
Glass's delta	0.98	0.58	0.22	0.94

Table 13. Standardized effect size measures (Cohen's d, Hedges' g, Glass's Δ)

Scale Reliability

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Perceived Immorality	0.89	3
Perceived Authenticity	0.82	5

Table 14. Cronbach's alpha for each scale

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Range	Maximum / Minimum	Variance
Item Means	3.52	3.48	3.55	0.07	1.02	0.001
Item Variances	2.56	2.48	2.69	0.21	1.08	0.013

Table 15. Item-Level Descriptive Statistics for "Perceived Immorality" Scale (3 Items)

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Range	Maximum / Minimum	Variance
Item Means	4.34	3.33	4.85	1.52	1.46	0.35
Item Variances	2.25	1.94	2.69	0.75	1.39	0.10

Table 16. Item-Level Descriptive Statistics for "Perceived Authenticity" Scale (5 Items)

Perceived Immorality

Condition	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
moral	63	3.56	1.45	0.18
traditional	66	3.48	1.46	0.18

Table 17. Group Statistics for "Perceived Immorality" by Condition

	t	df	p (one-tailed)	p (two-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.32	127	0.376	0.752	0.08	0.26	-0.42	0.59
Equal variances not assumed	0,32	126.81	0.376	0.752	0.08	0.26	-0.42	0.59

Table 18. Independent Samples t-test for "Perceived Immorality"

Measure	Value	Point Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Cohen's d	1.45	-0.06	-0.29	0.40
Hedges' correction	1.46	-0.06	-0.29	0.40
Glass's delta	1.46	-0.06	-0.29	0.40

Table 19. Effect Size Estimates for "Perceived Immorality"

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
... unfair."	129	1	7	3.53	1.64
... unjust."	129	1	7	3.55	1.58
... morally wrong."	129	1	7	3.48	1.58

Table 20. Descriptive Statistics for "Perceived Immorality" Scale

	Condition	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
... unfair."	traditional	66	3.41	1.69	0.21
	moral	63	3.65	1.59	0.20
... unjust."	traditional	66	3.58	1.61	0.20
	moral	63	3.52	1.55	0.20
... morally wrong."	traditional	66	3.45	1.62	0.20
	moral	63	3.51	1.55	0.20

Table 21. Group Means and Standard Deviations for "Perceived Immorality" Items by Condition

Perceived Authenticity

Condition	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
traditional	66	4.47	1.02	0.13
moral	63	4.19	1.25	0.16

Table 22. Group Statistics for "Perceived Authenticity " by Condition

	t	df	p (one-tailed)	p (two-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error	95% CI Lowe	95% CI Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.36	127	0.088	0.177	0.27	0.20	-0.12	0.67
Equal variances not assumed	1.35	119.92	0.089	0.179	0.27	0.20	-0.13	0.67

Table 23. Independent. t-test Results for "Perceived Authenticity"

Measure	Value	Point Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Cohen's d	1.14	0.24	-0.11	0.58
Hedges' correction	1.15	0.24	-0.11	0.58
Glass's delta	1.02	0.22	-0.13	0.57

Table 24. Effect Size Estimates for “Perceived Authenticity"

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
"Covita is authentic."	129	1	7	4.61	1.42
"Covita is true to its roots."	129	1	7	4.49	1.39
"Covita does not seem artificial."	129	1	7	4.84	1.55
"Covita does not try to be something it’s not."	129	1	7	4.41	1.48
"Covita is motivated by passion rather than profit."	129	1	7	3.31	1.64

Table 25. Descriptive Statistics for “Perceived Authenticity” Scale

	Condition	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
"Covita is authentic."	traditional	66	4.70	1.30	0.16
	moral	63	4.52	1.54	0.19
"Covita is true to its roots."	traditional	66	4.65	1.31	0.16
	moral	63	4.32	1.47	0.19
"Covita does not seem artificial."	traditional	66	5.05	1.41	0.17
	moral	63	4.63	1.68	0.21
"Covita does not try to be something it’s not."	traditional	66	4.50	1.43	0.18
	moral	63	4.32	1.53	0.19
"Covita is motivated by passion rather than profit."	traditional	66	3.44	1.61	0.20
	moral	63	3.17	1.68	0.21

Table 26. Group Means and Standard Deviations for “Perceived Authenticity” Items by Condition

Mediation Analysis using PROCESS macro by Hayes (2022)

```
Run MATRIX procedure:

Copyright 2013-2025 by Andrew F. Hayes. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
This version of PROCESS requires SPSS version 26 or later
Workshop schedule available at haskayne.ucalgary.ca/CCRAM
In SPSS 29 and later, change default output font to Courier New for tidier
output. More information about PROCESS at processmacro.org/faq.html.
This beta release has not been completely tested. Use at your own risk.


***************** PROCESS Procedure for SPSS Version 5.0 *****************

          Written by Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D.       www.afhayes.com
    Documentation available in Hayes (2022). www.guilford.com/p/hayes3

**************************************************************************
  Model: 4
      Y: imm_sc
      X: ad_dum
      M: auth_sc

Sample
Size:  129

Variable descriptive statistics
         imm_sc     ad_dum    auth_sc
Mean     3.5194      .4884     4.3333
SD       1.4463      .5018     1.1441
Min      1.0000      .0000     1.4000
Max      7.0000     1.0000     6.2000

Variable intercorrelations (Pearson r)
            imm_sc     ad_dum    auth_sc
imm_sc      1.0000      .0281     -.2845
ad_dum       .0281     1.0000     -.1197
auth_sc     -.2845     -.1197     1.0000

**************************************************************************

OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 auth_sc

Model Summary
          R       R-sq   Adj R-sq          F          p      SEest
      .1197      .0143      .0066     1.8476      .1765     1.1403

                SS         df         MS
Regress      2.4025     1.0000     2.4025
Residual   165.1441   127.0000     1.3003
Total      167.5467   128.0000     1.3090

Model
              coeff         se          t          p       LLCI       ULCI
constant     4.4667      .1404    31.8219      .0000     4.1889     4.7444
ad_dum       -.2730      .2009    -1.3593      .1765     -.6705      .1244

-----------
Some regression diagnostics

               Min.       Max.
fitted       4.1937     4.4667
residual    -3.0667     2.0063
t-resid     -2.7808     1.7889

Shape of residuals
```

```
        Skewness   Kurtosis
Value     -.3454     -.4533
se         .2132      .4233

Bonferroni-corrected p for largest t-residual
    t-resid    p-value    casenum
    -2.7808      .8069     4.0000

Most influential observations
            casenum     dfbeta
constant     4.0000     -.0472
ad_dum       4.0000      .0472

Variable tolerance and VIF
             Tol.        VIF
ad_dum     1.0000     1.0000

Breusch-Pagan test of heteroskedasticity
           Chi-sq         df          p
Normal     2.5166     1.0000      .1127
Robust     3.3158     1.0000      .0686

**************************************************************************

OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 imm_sc

Model Summary
          R       R-sq   Adj R-sq          F          p      SEest
      .2846      .0810      .0664     5.5526      .0049     1.3975

                 SS         df         MS
Regress     21.6876     2.0000    10.8438
Residual   246.0695   126.0000     1.9529
Total      267.7571   128.0000     2.0919

Model
              coeff         se          t          p       LLCI       ULCI
constant     5.0905      .5153     9.8790      .0000     4.0708     6.1103
ad_dum       -.0174      .2479     -.0702      .9441     -.5081      .4732
auth_sc      -.3606      .1087    -3.3161      .0012     -.5758     -.1454

-----------
Some regression diagnostics

               Min.       Max.
fitted       2.8373     4.5857
residual    -2.9366     3.8021
t-resid     -2.1587     2.8264

Shape of residuals
        Skewness   Kurtosis
Value      .3713     -.5871
se         .2132      .4233

Bonferroni-corrected p for largest t-residual
    t-resid    p-value    casenum
     2.8264      .7073    12.0000

Most influential observations
            casenum     dfbeta
constant     7.0000     -.1488
ad_dum      12.0000      .0682
auth_sc     81.0000      .0294

Variable tolerance and VIF
              Tol.        VIF
ad_dum        .9857     1.0145
auth_sc       .9857     1.0145
```

```
Breusch-Pagan test of heteroskedasticity
          Chi-sq        df          p
Normal      .2792     2.0000      .8697
Robust      .4019     2.0000      .8180

************************* TOTAL EFFECT MODEL ***************************

OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 imm_sc

Model Summary
          R       R-sq   Adj R-sq          F          p      SEest
      .0281      .0008     -.0071      .1005      .7517     1.4514

                SS         df         MS
Regress       .2117     1.0000      .2117
Residual   267.5454   127.0000     2.1067
Total      267.7571   128.0000     2.0919

Model
              coeff         se          t          p       LLCI       ULCI
constant     3.4798      .1787    19.4773      .0000     3.1263     3.8333
ad_dum        .0810      .2557      .3170      .7517     -.4248      .5869

-----------
Some regression diagnostics

               Min.       Max.
fitted       3.4798     3.5608
residual    -2.5608     3.4392
t-resid     -1.7940     2.4344

Shape of residuals
        Skewness   Kurtosis
Value      .3058     -.8781
se         .2132      .4233

Bonferroni-corrected p for largest t-residual
    t-resid    p-value    Casenum
     2.4344     1.0000    12.0000

Most influential observations
           casenum     dfbeta
constant   37.0000      .0439
ad_dum     12.0000      .0555

Variable tolerance and VIF
             Tol.        VIF
ad_dum     1.0000     1.0000

Breusch-Pagan test of heteroskedasticity
          Chi-sq        df          p
Normal      .0047     1.0000      .9452
Robust      .0085     1.0000      .9264

***************** CORRELATIONS BETWEEN MODEL RESIDUALS *****************

          auth_sc     imm_sc
auth_sc    1.0000      .0000
imm_sc      .0000     1.0000


************* TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *************

Total effect of X on Y
     Effect         se          t          p       LLCI       ULCI
      .0810      .2557      .3170      .7517     -.4248      .5869

Direct effect of X on Y
     Effect         se          t          p       LLCI       ULCI
```

```
     -.0174      .2479     -.0702      .9441     -.5081      .4732

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:
            Effect     BootSE   BootLLCI   BootULCI
auth_sc      .0985      .0836     -.0372      .2861

Cases with greatest influence on indirect effect(s):
           casenum     dfb_ie
auth_sc   103.0000      .0208

*********************** ANALYSIS NOTES AND ERRORS ************************

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output:
  95.0000

Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals:
  5000

------ END MATRIX -----
```

10. Explanation of generative AI and AI-supported technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this thesis, ChatGPT (4.0 and o1), Grammarly, and the paraphrasing tool QuillBot were used to edit texts. Scite Assistant was used to search for relevant literature. The AI-based translation tool Deepl was used to translate between German and English. After using these tools and services, I reviewed and edited the content as needed.